Dark Cloud

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Fandom: yu-gi-oh! vrains

Summary: Aoi has fallen for Yusaku, who pushes her away but secretly returns her feelings. The two begin a sexual relationship where their feelings create more harm than good. Can Yusaku change to be the man Aoi needs? Or will Aoi's heart break under the pressure of Yusaku's iciness? WARNING: Lemons

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1. The First Time

'Do you want to degrade me?'

It started with a simple question. A question that was out of the ordinary, but a simple question nonetheless.

It was a question that Yusaku didn't know how to answer. Should he say yes or no? The fact that he was even contemplating was a telltale sign of his moral corruption. Yusaku liked to think that deep down he was a chivalrous hero who knew no sin, but a decade of vengeance inevitably changed him. Although he didn't want to drag others into the darkness, it was also because the idea never crossed him that anyone would want to join him where there was no light. Now, Aoi Zaizen - someone he thought exuded light - was asking for an invitation into his own personal hell.

Why couldn't he refuse outright?

'What do you mean?' he asks instead.

'Do you want to hurt me?'

'Why would I ever want to do that?'

'To feel good.'

Yusaku's green gaze hardened. He looked right into the eyes of the woman in his arms, who knew what she was doing but was cruel enough to continue on anyway, and tightened his already steel-strong grip on her. 'Why do you think that hurting you would make me feel good?'

'Because maybe you wouldn't feel so lonely anymore if you had someone to hurt alongside you.'

'Who the hell are you to speak as if you understand me?!' he growls with sudden intensity. Without warning, he unwraps his arms from around her and his hands fly up to her neck. She whimpers for only a second before she

regains some composure. The features of her face settle into what Yusaku perceives as pleasure; this irritates him. He's hurting her. He's genuinely, seriously hurting her. So why is she biting her lip? Why is she arching her back so that her body pushes up against him?

How dare she enjoy his anger.

'I'll do anything you want.' she whispers. 'I just want to understand you.'

His grip on her neck tightens. 'You can't understand me...' he hisses back. 'You don't know anything about me!'

'I-I...' Aoi tried to speak, but it was next to impossible. She hoped that she he could see the sincerity in her eyes, but he abruptly let her go and turned his back to her. His hands fell into fists at his sides. She could see that he was shaking, but that moment of vulnerability gave her confidence to pursue him further. She reached out to swipe his shoulder, an action which prompted him to turn around. That was when she swiftly leaned forward to kiss him.

He didn't push her away.

Instead, he pushed against her until the back of her knees bumped into a desk. The impact caused her to break their kiss by toppling backwards so that she was laid out in front of him with her thighs on either side of his hips as he stood tall. This lasted for only a second before he leaned over her to kiss her again. This time, so deeply and sensually that she was temporarily paralyzed by all the emotion surging from within her. When she finally managed to regain some semblance of control, she wrapped her arms around his neck and massaged his tongue with hers.

Despite being the perpetually stoic sister-in-law of the strict Akira Zaizen, Aoi was in this very moment was unbecoming of her status. She was moaning and writhing underneath a man she barely knew but desperately wanted. In the back of her mind she knew that her brother would be severely disappointed with her, but when it came to Playmaker, she could only hope that Akira could one day understand just how much she needed

to be close to him. Playmaker was the only person she knew other than herself who was debilitatingly lonely.

It made her feel like she wasn't so alone anymore.

So even though it'd piss Akira off, she had to get closer to Playmaker. Even if Yusaku wasn't aware that she knew of his virtual identity, she wanted to get closer to him so that neither of them would ever have to be alone ever again.

'Do I want to degrade you?' Yusaku whispered against her lips. Heavy breathing mingled between them, the only sound that could be heard in an awkwardly empty classroom. 'Who do you think I am? Why would you ask me something like that? Or maybe...'

'Eh?'

'The truth is that you *want* to be degraded?'

Aoi's heart skips a beat. 'Why... Why would I want that?'

'One...' Yusaku begins as his hands fly up to the neckline of the school sweater she wears under the blazer. 'You are aroused by the idea of being sexually submissive to a dominant partner,' he made the first point before ripping that thick article of clothing apart. 'Two...' his hands move to the collar of her uniform's white button-up. 'You want to rebel against your brother, and you know this will anger him if he ever found out,' he tears open her shirt and the buttons land loudly on the floor. He likes the white lace of her bra. 'Three...' he slips two long fingers into her mouth. 'For once in your life, you want to have the feeling that you no longer have to be in control.'

Yusaku starts pumping his fingers in and out of her mouth slowly, as if trying to show her what he wants to do to her in more intimate contexts. Aoi seems to enjoy it. She swirls her tongue around his fingers and whimpers as she tries to suck him in deeper. He reciprocates by thrusting his digits so far down her throat that she gags, but he'd be lying if he didn't

admit that the sensation of her throat closing in around something else of his excited him.

'Am I right?' he manages to say.

She can't speak, but her eyes answer him.

Yusaku's breath hitches in his throat. It wasn't hard to see from the very beginning that Aoi was beautiful. Hell, even an AI felt the need to point out how beautiful she was. But there was something about the way her lonely, sad eyes burned into him in this very moment that made her appear the most striking he'd ever seen her. Despite the lewd display of having his fingers in her mouth, there was a stunning innocence that illuminated her features.

Alongside that purity was profound sadness. Even though she stared at him with longing and something else he couldn't describe but hoped was love, she also looked so sad. He something sparkle in the corner of her eyes, so he withdrew his fingers from her mouth and leaned in to kiss her. It was an action that was done instinctively to soothe her, but he didn't at all succeed. He felt her tremble and heard her whimper. When he opened his eyes to see her reaction, his chest tightened painfully to see that she was crying.

'What's wrong with you?' he asks without thinking. He mentally kicks himself for sounding so callous. He didn't at all mean it that way; he just wanted to know what was wrong. Was he doing something wrong?

'I don't know.' she smiles sadly.

'Why are you crying?'

'Because it hurts.'

'What hurts?' Yusaku's voice is unexpectedly empathetic. 'Am I hurting you?'

'No, you're not.' she can hardly speak. She's whimpering in between syllables. He's panicking. And he's also upset to see her so sad.

'Where does it hurt?'

'Everywhere.' she reveals. She's never been so honest in her life. 'It hurts everywhere. All the time. It won't stop.'

He doesn't know what to say.

He speaks anyway.

'I don't want to hurt you.'

'But you will.' Aoi tells him. 'You can't help it.'

'I won't.' he insists. Jade eyes are brimming with sincerity. 'I promise. I don't want to hurt you.'

'You will. Because I care about you, you will. You might not want to, but you will.'

'I-'

'It's OK.' she reaches up to cup his face. 'I'll love you anyway.'

Yusaku doesn't know why he still fucks her after that.

He tried his best to be a good lover. Despite his inexperience, he focused on listening to the subtle cues her body gave him. If she leaned into him, he'd repeat whatever it was that got that reaction out of her. If he saw her biting her lip so hard that he was worried she'd draw blood, he'd push into her slower. If she tightened around him, he'd moan into the curve of her neck to let her know that her pleasure was his pleasure. At the very least, he wanted her to know that in this moment, they were one and the same. If she hurt, he hurt with her. If she was feeling good, then that knowledge was more than enough to give him satisfaction.

Do you want to degrade me?

In the beginning, he did. Because he "loved her," he wanted to own her. Because he had control taken away from him in his life, he wanted to take control of everything around him. He may not have been conscious of it before now, but the self-discovery hit him hard.

Yusaku's self-reflection made him realize that he and Aoi Zaizen could never be together.

His dysfunction shouldn't drag her into the dark. While it was true that she was by no means baggage-free, he wasn't the person to help her through her problems. If he had been just a little bit weaker, he would have really, truly hurt her. Despite him trying not to physically hurt her to prove her wrong and show that he genuinely cared about her, the fact that he was even doing this with her would hurt her later. He knew this, but he did it anyway. Because for even a fraction of a second, he wanted to feel less lonely. Even if he wound up missing her so much more later, it was worth it to go all the way now.

In the middle of it all, he looks down to see her face. His own features are scrunched up in what he can only imagine is an unpleasant expression of labor and need. He expects her to have a better expression than his, but her eyes are the saddest he's ever seen and he realizes that no moans escape her. She's utterly silent, staring at him with an unreadable expression as he moves in and out of her.

'It hurts.' she says.

'I know.' he answers back, leaning over her and burying her head in his shoulders. His hands are entangled in her hair and his thrusts become deeper, more urgent.

'Don't stop.' Aoi wraps her arms around his back. She rakes her nails from the back of his neck to around his ribs. He hisses; he's pretty sure that she scratched him deep enough to mark him for tomorrow. 'H-Harder...' she commands and he obeys. She squeaks when he hits her womb, but the

sensation turns her on despite the physical pain. Her abdomen feels like he's spearing right through it, but her skin is pleasantly on fire. 'Yu... Yus-sa...'

Without warning, he grunts and twitches over her. He thrusts into her one more time, deeper than he ever has before, and Aoi feels the warmth of seed being shot into her. As if with no regard for her feelings, Yusaku extracts himself from her and begins dressing himself back into his school uniform the second he empties all of himself into her.

Wordlessly, Aoi scrambles to do the same.

She thought she was being rather quick, but when she turned around to try and speak to her newfound lover, he was nowhere to be found.

When she's home alone again later that evening, she lays on the bed for hours just waiting for the moon's light to dim. A hundred thoughts race through her mind until one finally allows her to shed a tear.

You hurt me. I was right.

Author's Note: Hey guys! Thanks for reading. I wanted to tackle a lot of the complex character quirks I observed when watching these two. I hoped you enjoyed reading it and will let me know what you think!

2. Coward

After they had sex for the first time, Yusaku completely ignored Aoi. This worsened the state of her already weak spirit.

Ever since her and Akira's parents died, she lived in a perpetual state of mental instability wherein she was always low in energy but had fits of anxiety out of nowhere. When she took on the role of Blue Angel, this nervous spell was relieved somewhat. At the very least, she was never anxious when she was inside Link VRAINS. Plus, when her relationship with her stepbrother improved, she no longer had very intense moments of anxiety. Usually, she'd only experience her panic attacks in large, crowded areas. Otherwise, she was proud of herself for how far she'd come with her self-confidence and anxiety.

Of course, all that progress had gone to shit after Yusaku abandoned her.

If anything, losing her virginity added another facet to her depression.

When she got home from school after she lost herself to Yusaku, the high-tech robot her brother bought for their household greeted her as usual. Later on in the evening, she had dinner with Akira, who didn't think that anything was off with her. For a while, nothing really *was* wrong. She even questioned if she had actually had sex or if it had been a figment of her imagination.

But when she saw her reflection in the mirror as she was washing her face to get ready for bed, the realization hit her like a brick to the face. She searched her visage for any semblance of the person she used to be, but she was horrified (and somewhat relieved) to note that she looked completely different. Sure, her features were the same. But there was a loss of innocence.

She panicked.

That was when she tried calling Yusaku, but to no avail. She couldn't get any sleep that night either, but she told herself that it would all be fine in the

morning because she could talk to Yusaku about it at school.

If she could find him, that is. He was nowhere to be found. She tried calling him again, but he didn't even return the first call last night. She sent him a few messages, but she wasn't even sure if they were going through. Eventually, Aoi figured that he probably attended class but was avoiding her.

That crushed her.

She burst into tears before she could make it home. Thoughts of her first time consumed her thoughts until she was no longer confident that she could power through the day without screaming. She raised her hand in class, lied that she would go to the infirmary, and then locked herself in a bathroom stall and cried until her eyes were raw.

When she arrived home later that evening, she decided to give up and in a fit of rage, blocked Yusaku from all modes of communication. Although, she figured that he wouldn't care much anyway. For all she knew, she was already blocked from his end.

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5 hours ago

Hey, call me when you can

2 hours ago

Hey, I don't think you got my first message. I just wanted to talk to you when you're free? Call me when you can please.

1 hour ago

Fujiki-kun, please call me

53 mins ago

Please call me I'm begging you

50 mins ago

Did I do something wrong?

49 mins ago

Are you mad at me?

30 mins ago

I'm sorry. Please talk to me.

18 mins ago

Do you hate me?

'Why is that cutie apologizing to you?' Ai grumbled. 'You should be the one apologizing to her after ghosting her like this.'

Yusaku said nothing. He simply continued on with his work, typing away at the computer in his room. Today, he didn't want to be around Kusanagi. Since the two have known each other for so long, Yusaku feared that Kusanagi would be able to sense that something was different. For the moment, Yusaku didn't feel like talking about his first time with Aoi Zaizen of all people. Never in a million years did he think that he would do that with her.

'Hey!' Ai persisted. It wasn't going to let its master get away with it this time. Even though it was only an AI, it had enough information from its database to figure out that Aoi must be suffering.

'Be quiet.' Yusaku finally replied.

'No! I won't be quiet! You're being a jerk to that babe! Is that any way to treat your girlfriend?!'

'Zaizen Aoi is *not* my girlfriend.' he declared firmly.

'Then what happened yesterday-'

'*Nothing*. Nothing happened yesterday.'

'Just 'cause you can pretend like nothing happened doesn't mean that *she* can.'

Yusaku's posture noticeably stiffened.

'Based on my analysis of the data concerning social interaction between two heterosexual individuals of the opposite sex, having sex complicates-'

'There's *nothing* to complicate!' Yusaku's voice rose. 'Zaizen Aoi and I are nothing to each other and it will stay that way. What happened between us was-'

'Ah-*ha*! So you admit something *did* happen!'

'*Purely physical*.' Yusaku completed the sentence with a glare directed towards the Ignis, who was dancing triumphantly on top of the Duel Disk. 'Everything I felt was just my body reacting to her.'

'But she said that she cared about you.'

'She was just caught up in the moment.'

'Oh, yeah?' Ai raised a brow and crossed its arms. 'Is that why she keeps texting you?'

'Who knows.'

Ai sighed. 'You really are heartless, you know that? This girl has feelings for yo-*oh*!' the AI glanced over at Yusaku's phone buzzing right next to it on the desk. 'She sent another text!'

The exasperated student didn't even bother reading it. Without glancing at the message, he swiped it on the screen to delete it. He then proceeded to block Aoi's number.

'Hey!' Ai shouted disbelievingly. 'Are you freaking serious?!'

'I just don't want to deal with it.' Yusaku admitted. 'This is too much work. I don't have the time for this.'

Aoi thought that if she got a good night's sleep, she'd be able to perform well at school the next day. She took a couple of sleeping pills to knock herself out because she knew she wouldn't be able to relax otherwise. But when she awoke the next day, she felt even worse; still depressed, but now also groggy and nauseous. She tried to pay attention in class, but the room was spinning. Every so often, she'd have to bury her head in her hands to regain a stable vision. Thankfully, no one asked her about her odd behaviour. Probably because she didn't have friends who cared about her anyway.

I need to eat something, she decided. She skipped breakfast earlier since Akira couldn't join her (he had problems at work). Perhaps her drowsiness was also a consequence of her empty stomach. A little food might relieve her of her symptoms.

There was a hot dog truck parked right outside the school gates. It was called Cafe Nagi. No one was lining up, so she'd be able to get her order quickly. Based on convenience, she decided to go get herself something from that mobile cafe. She walked over, but stopped abruptly when she noticed a familiar figure sitting on the table right in front of the hot dog vendor.

Yusaku was typing away at his laptop, periodically stopping to take a sip of his soda.

He hadn't noticed her at all, thank goodness.

Nevertheless, the reaction was instantaneous. Upon seeing him, Aoi's body felt like it had been set on fire. Her chest twisted painfully and a killer headache threatened to split her brain apart. Even though she hadn't had anything to eat, she felt like her intestines were about to come up her throat.

Memories of Yusaku kissing her, holding her, loving (?) her replayed in a sped up, endless loop in her mind's eye and she felt like she was going to cry.

Fuck him, she thought painfully before turning on her heel with wobbly legs. Despite herself, she was actually walking quite normally and quickly. She didn't know where she wanted to go, but she knew she just had to get out of that space.

Before long, she found herself back in the school's main building. Once within the safety of those concrete walls, she found the nearest bathroom where she locked herself again in a stall and cried her heart out.

From his peripheral, Yusaku caught sight of someone turning away from him rapidly. He glanced at the figure and his heart sank when he realized it was Aoi Zaizen.

'Yeah, watch her go, dummy.' Ai huffed in its Duel Disk form. 'You should have seen her face. Even my extensive database prevents me from classifying whether she was sad, angry, or in pain.'

'Hey, Yusaku...' Kusanagi called from behind the counter. 'Wasn't that Zaizen's sister-in-law?'

'Uh-huh.' Ai answered for its master. 'Yusaku had sex with her the other day.'

Kusanagi's jaw dropped.

'Be quiet!' Yusaku hissed at the Ignis, but it was too late. Kusanagi heard.

'Yusaku, what?!' Kusanagi demanded to know.

'I don't want to talk about it.' the younger man said firmly.

'I don't care if you don't want to talk about it!' Kusanagi took off his apron and made his way out of the truck. 'Did you use protection?!'

Yusaku winced. 'No.'

Kusanagi took a seat in front of Yusaku. He studied his partner's unreadable face for what seemed like forever. 'So... Are you guys dating now, or...?'

'Absolutely not-'

'The cutie kept texting him yesterday.' Ai interrupted. 'And he blocked her.'

Kusanagi threw his hands up in the air. 'Yusaku!'

'What?' Yusaku finally snapped. He shut off his laptop and glared at Kusanagi with a frown. 'We had sex. So what? Everyone does it. It doesn't have to mean anything.'

'Yusaku, come on.' the hot dog vendor chuckled dryly. 'We both know you're not the type to do something like that if it means nothing.'

'I don't have the time to date. I especially don't have the time to date someone like her.'

'Geez, where is this anger coming from?!' Kusanagi narrowed his eyes. 'You don't have to date her, but you don't have to block her! And so what if you date her anyway? If you're both happy-'

'I *can't* make her happy!' Yusaku said without thinking. After the words tumbled out of his mouth, he recoiled as if shocked by his own confession. Kusanagi flashed him a knowing smile and Yusaku looked away.

'Yusaku... Apologize to her for being an idiot.'

'Do you know why you're here, Zaizen-san?' Den City High School's principal asked the student seated in front of him.

Aoi shook her head. She was pulled aside as she was exiting the bathroom by a teacher, who then told her that the principal wanted to have a word with her. Aoi assumed it was because of how ill she looked. It couldn't have been because her grades were bad, because they weren't. She had to perform well in school or Akira wouldn't let her hear the end of it.

'Zaizen-san... I want to have a serious conversation with you.'

Aoi nodded.

'And I don't know how to bring this up.' the principal's expression turned anxious. Aoi tilted her head, confused. 'I know this is a sensitive topic because of how private it should be, but I am obligated to enforce the rules of our school by bringing this to your attention.'

'What are you talking about?' Aoi scrunched her brows together.

'As you know, since we always inform our students upon enrolment...' the principal whipped out a sheet of paper that stipulated the school's guidelines on conduct. 'All our facilities have cameras installed. A few times a week, we review the footage to see if we find anything suspicious.'

Aoi's nausea returned with a vengeance.

'We found footage of you and another student engaging in sexual activity in one of our classrooms.'

'T-That's-'

'Unfortunately, I am required to inform your guardian and have a conversation with both of you about what kind of disciplinary action to take moving forward.'

Hey guys, thanks so much for reading the last chapter and leaving your reviews! I really want to use this story as an opportunity to explore some psychological aspects of the characters. I like how VRAINS,

compared to the past spinoffs, shows more complex traits to the characters. This is my second story and it is unplanned, so if anyone has any suggestions, I would love to hear them. Thanks again for reading! Hope to hear from you!

3. Pretty

'Just to reiterate...' Den City High School's principal rubbed his temples in exasperation. It was a long, awkward meeting for everyone involved and he was just glad that it was finally ending. 'Due to your sister-in-law's impressive academic standing, we will not be putting this incident of misconduct on her permanent transcript. Provided, however, that she attend meetings with a school counsellor every week until the end of the semester.'

'Thank you for your kind understanding.' Akira Zaizen said curtly.

Without another word, Akira stood up and made his way out the office. Aoi followed suit, knowing that she was in for a world of hurt outside of these walls. She anticipated that her brother was going to lecture her. The reality, however, was much more painful than that.

Akira didn't speak a word to her all the way outside the school gates. Without looking at her, he entered the limousine when it pulled up to the entrance of the campus. Aoi walked around the vehicle to get in on the other side. The older step sibling instructed the driver to head home as well as to bring up the divider so he could talk to Aoi in private.

The whole thing must have taken five minutes. But to Aoi, it felt like an eternity.

'Did he rape you?'

'No.'

'So then why...' Akira was at a loss for words. Was Aoi seriously implying that she *consented* to such a shameful act? Did she have no regard for his status at SOL Technologies whatsoever? 'Why were you doing that with that guy?'

'I thought it would bring us closer.'

Akira's heart sank. Aoi's naivety was killing him. The thought of some stranger recognizing that innocence in her and then taking advantage of that... 'Closer? You wanted to be closer to that man?'

'Yes, Onii-sama.'

'Do you like this man?'

She remained silent.

'You disappoint me, Aoi.'

'Onii-sama...'

'I thought I raised you better.' Akira's voice was filled with pained venom. Like it hurt him to know what his stepsister had done, and that she had somehow committed a grave sin against him for doing what she did. 'I did everything for you. I worked hard. I nearly killed myself trying to provide for you, so why? Why are you so unhappy?'

'I-'

'I allowed you to continue being Blue Angel in an act of trust, but how could you do this to me?' his hands balled into fists on his thighs. Aoi eyed them and it made her feel terrible to see that he was shaking. She was causing him a lot of pain. This was pain he didn't deserve, especially not after everything he's done for her. But Aoi didn't know that her stepbrother would be so affected by what she chose to do with *her own body*. It was baffling. Just because she had sex, didn't mean that she didn't love her family.

'Onii-sama, I didn't mean to hurt you.' she whispered. 'But in the moment... I wanted to do it with that person.'

'*Why*?'

'Because I wanted to be with him.'

'That just isn't good enough.' he finally turned to face look straight into her eyes. Aoi was nearly brought to tears to see that Akira was desperately trying to fight back tears. The whites of his eyes were red and his lips were pulled back in a snarl. 'I thought you were better than that.'

Aoi's heart was beating faster. Adrenaline was pumping in her veins now. What did Akira just say to her? Oh, the ways she could have answered back to hurt him...

But it wasn't worth it.

'I'm sorry, Onii-sama.' she repeated robotically.

'That's not going to change anything, is it? No matter what you say, at the end of the day, you still disappoint me. What especially irks me is your choice in men. That man is a nobody. That man *lied* to my face!'

Aoi furrowed her brows. 'Lied to you?'

'Yes. When you fell into a coma, Fujiki Yusaku brought you to the hospital.'

'No way.' Aoi breathed. Despite being between a wall and a sword regarding her brother, she couldn't help but feel her heart flutter at the discovery that the same man she was falling for was the one who cared for her after she fell in battle. That, in addition to the fact that Playmaker acquired the removal program to wake her up... Yusaku saved her twice. She hated him this past couple of days for ignoring her, but now, all she wanted to do was talk to him again. He couldn't save her that many times if he felt nothing her, right?

She felt a sliver of hope.

'I asked him if you two were dating.' Akira continued. 'He lied and told me that you two were just classmates.'

Aoi's heart sank. 'Oh.'

'*Oh*? That's all you have to say?'

"Onii-sama... He and I really aren't seeing each other.'

'Oh, so you'll sleep with just any guy?'

Aoi's chest tightened. That *stung*. 'No.'

'But you just said that you two aren't dating.' Akira's tone became stern. 'So you'll sleep with a man who doesn't love you?'

*That's **my** choice!* Aoi thought angrily, but remained silent. Her hands were shaking now.

'Tell me, was it worth it?' Akira pressed. 'Do you think you were being smart in that situation?'

'No.' Aoi couldn't hide the shakiness in her voice.

Akira scoffed. 'What did he have to do, Aoi? Tell me what he told you for you to become utterly submissive to him. Did he tell you that you were pretty? Is that seriously all it takes for you to let him do whatever he wants to you?'

'No.' she choked. 'He didn't tell me I was pretty.'

'Then how did it happen?'

'I... I don't know. It just happened.'

'Then he raped you.' Akira insisted, red in the face. Aoi was worried that he'd start frothing at the mouth soon. She had never seen him so angry in her entire life.

'He didn't rape me.'

'Then how is it that you let a man who doesn't love you or doesn't think you're beautiful use your body?'

Emotionally defeated, Aoi leaned her forehead against the glass window of her side of the car. She shut her eyelids and prayed for strength to endure this ride back home.

Her heart was aching for two main reasons. Firstly, she couldn't for the life of her process the fact that she was being slut shamed by her own brother-in-law, who was always more like a father to her. The fact that he was upset over a decision she made for herself with her own body left a bitter taste in her mouth. It wasn't even that he was angry that she was caught on camera. He was pissed that she had sex. What the hell? It's not like she was the only person in the world to do so.

Secondly, for all the poison in his words, Akira had a point. Why did she have sex with a man who didn't love her? That realization cut right through her; Yusaku didn't love her, and he most certainly didn't bother to even pretend to care about her. He fucked her and left; no conversation, no checking up on her. He made a clean exit.

That's his choice too, Aoi thought sadly, *If he doesn't want anything to do with me, then I can't ask him to change that.*

When the stepsiblngs finally made it home together, they parted ways to their own separate bedrooms without another word.

Aoi activated her tablet device in her bedroom. She checked LINK VRAINS from a spectator avatar; a butterfly. Lo and behold, Playmaker was dueling a Knight of Hanoi. By now, Aoi already knew that Yusaku was Playmaker. So seeing that avatar hurt her a little bit, but it also gave her the comfort of being able to look at him without him hating her.

Playmaker had just delivered the final blow. His monster attacked Hanoi's henchman directly, causing a virtual explosion. A young boy's avatar was caught in the mix, but Playmaker saved him in time. Aoi imagined that the crowd gather at the city square was cheering. She smiled to herself. Despite being so cold, Yusaku had his moments too.

He seemed so much kinder as Playmaker.

And when he touched her.

'I don't want to hurt you.' Yusaku said.

He leaned over her and wrapped what he could hold of her body in his arms. He buried her face into the curve of his neck to comfort her as he deepened his thrusts. Aoi reached behind him and raked her nails down his back.

It hurts.

But he was being so kind, how could she stop him?

And even though it physically hurt, her insides had never felt more connected with another human being. Every shred of love and admiration she had for Yusaku rose to the surface, heightening her senses until even just running her fingers through his back felt like she was being set pleasantly on fire. And she knew it was because she was in love with him. For some stupid, nonsensical reason, she was in love with him.

Aoi shook her head. She had to snap herself out of her daydreams.

Anyway, the person Yusaku was when he wanted to get into her pants was different from the person he was to her now.

Yusaku was never going to talk to her again. There was no use reminiscing about a man who had cut her out of his life.

But still... She thought that he could somehow love her.

It hurt too much to be proven wrong.

She turned off her tablet. Then, she climbed into her bed and laid face up to stare at the ceiling until the sun went down.

Before school the next day, Aoi took a shower. She set the temperature to piping hot because she wanted to feel something other than the shame crawling on her skin. She was practically scratching soap into her skin, but

no matter how rough she felt, she could never shake off the feeling that she had lost a part of herself. When she stepped out of the shower, she caught a glimpse of her full body in the mirror.

Even amidst the steam, she saw.

For the first time since she slept with Yusaku, she took a good look at her reflection.

Her skin was marred with the blacks and blues of where she had been bitten and sucked. There was a large, angry bruise forming at the base of her neck, where her school tie was going to go over. On top of her breasts were lightly forming specks. Strangely enough, for the first few seconds that she noticed her physical change, she felt a surge of happiness. Of course, the heartbreak soon dawned on her.

Yusaku used her. He disappeared from her life and left only the fingerprints of their one, shared moment.

The bruises might disappear, but the scars inside of her won't.

With this realization in mind, Aoi got dressed and walked downstairs in a daze. Her brother was already waiting for her at the table with their breakfast laid out. This was unusual. He was normally not available at meal times or was tardy. Aoi was so used to beginning the day at the table by herself. She supposed that their argument yesterday had something to do with his unusual eagerness to accompany her this morning.

'Good morning, Onii-sama.' Aoi greeted softly as she took her seat.

'Good morning.' Akira propped his elbows up on the table and perched his chin on top of folded hands. 'We need to talk.'

Didn't we do enough of that yesterday? she thought. 'Of course, Onii-sama.'

'What are your intentions with Fujiki Yusaku?'

Aoi's heart skipped a beat. 'What do you mean?'

'Are you going to see him today? Or any other day?'

'I...'

'You said yesterday that you two aren't dating. Are you at least friends? Do you constantly interact?'

'No. Nothing like that.'

'Then stay away from him from now on.'

Aoi nodded obediently. She didn't think that she'd have any trouble avoiding Yusaku, since he appeared to be doing a good enough job for both of them.

'Think of me.' Akira sighed. 'Think of my position. I hope you realize that your actions impact more people than just yourself.'

'Yes, Onii-sama.'

At school, Yusaku made it his mission to find Aoi. Kusanagi was right; he should at least apologize for being out of contact. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, the fact that he and Aoi had sex opened up the can of worms of human relationships. Regardless if there were feelings involved, it was one of those situations wherein a conversation had to take place. Especially considering that they were in the same year group and would inevitably bump into each other.

He tried looking for her during the first break of the day, but he had no luck whatsoever. Ai tried to use its facial recognition software to help out, but it was no use. However, Yusaku knew for certain that Aoi was on campus today because Naoki Shima had verified that information during first period.

Why was this woman so hard to find?

As usual, Yusaku was so immersed in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed that class had ended.

'Hey, Fujiki!' Naoki bellowed into his classmate's ear, starting Yusaku. 'Class is over!'

Yusaku narrowed his eyes. 'Ah.'

'Thinking about something as usual, huh?'

The taller teenager shrugged. 'Maybe.'

'Are you thinking about Zaizen?'

Yusaku jolted in his seat. 'What?'

'Well, you asked me about her earlier. So, are you thinking about her?'

'I-'

'If you're having trouble finding her, I think she usually eats lunch by herself on the rooftop.'

For once in his life, Yusaku was grateful that Naoki had come up to him to make conversation. When the bell rang to signify the second break for the day, Yusaku made his way to the rooftop of the building. Sure enough, he spotted Aoi's figure from the back. She was leaning over the railings to stare out into the sky. Yusaku's heart was beating a mile a minute. His vision was a little hazy. This was more nerve-wrecking than he realized.

He walked over to her and she heard his footsteps. Her back stiffened, cautious because she wasn't expecting anyone. Then, she turned around and upon seeing him, hazel eyes widened to the size of saucers.

She looked terrified.

He was anxious to finally face her after what happened between them.

'Hey...' he started, proud that his voice gave away no emotion. 'I want to talk to you.'

She stared at him for the longest time before replying, 'Why? You never replied to a single message I sent you.'

'I'm sorry. I... I didn't know how to approach you after what happened between us.'

'You were unsure of how to talk to me, or you couldn't be bothered? Because the least you could have done is let me know that you were confused. I was left out in the cold. I thought you hated me. I-' she choked, so she folded her arms over her chest defensively - a habit of hers whenever she felt insecure.

'Hey...'

'I love you.'

Yusaku's heart stopped.

'I love both of you; this you, and Playmaker too.' she admitted. 'I slept with you because I wanted to show you that I love you. I thought that maybe, the way you touched me would show me whether or not you loved me back. But...'

Yusaku was in shock.

He never, for the life of him, would have considered that Aoi seriously had feelings for him. But now that it was all happening, the idea of being with her was tempting. He could cast aside his need for vengeance and start fresh with her. But would that really satisfy him in the long run? What about the incident from a decade ago? Didn't he still need to shed some blood for that? If he were to return Aoi's feelings, he wouldn't have the heart to exact

his revenge. A relationship would soften him. But what he needed was an iron-strong will.

'Yusaku-kun...'

He made his decision.

'I'm sorry.' his voice was colder than ice. 'But I don't think of you that way.'

His rejection cut her like sharp glass. Rather than scream out in pain, she remained silent. The pair stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, until Aoi cracked the thick air by speaking again, 'I know. After all, even though we were so close together in that moment, you never once told me that you thought I was pretty.'

With those words, Yusaku felt her pain. His hands balled into fists at his sides. No matter what, he had to be strong and push her away. All that crap Ai and Kusanagi were saying about considering having an intimate relationship with another human being... He couldn't have that. All he had was revenge, and he had to push Aoi away before she was caught up in it. 'Because I *don't* find you attractive. Like I said, I don't think of you that way.'

'What was I to you, then?' she demanded angrily. 'Was I just a nice fuck for you?'

'A nice fuck?' he chuckled darkly. 'What makes you think that I think of you in such high regard?'

Her heart dropped. 'What did you say?'

'I fucked you. So what? You're not a special girl. I won't cherish what happened between you and I.'

'Why not?' she whispered. Her spirit was breaking. 'Was I not good enough for you? Did I do something wrong?'

'Not really. But it's not like you did for me what no other girl can do. In that moment, there was no love or passion between us.'

'*I* love you! I was passionate about you-'

'Yes. That was very entertaining.'

Aoi was trembling uncontrollably. 'Is that all my feelings are to you, then? Entertainment?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Then-'

'I think of them as a nuisance. Just like how I think of you.'

'I see.' she breathed. Tears were pooling in her eyes. 'Thank you for being so honest with me.' she forced a chipper tone and smiled sadly.

Yusaku nodded and turned on his heel. He had to get out of there before his resolve waned. His fists were so tight that he was drawing blood. But he couldn't let her see, because she deserved to be set apart from him. He didn't deserve to be with someone like her.

Aoi watched him leave. Every step he took away from her was another crack in her heart forming. When he closed the door behind him, she allowed her tears to fall. Suddenly, her body felt incredibly dirty.

She didn't want to be in it anymore.

Why are you so cruel to me? she thought sadly, *Even if you don't love me, why can't you at least be nice to me?*

Aoi missed the rest of her classes that day. She vowed only to leave the rooftop when her tears stopped flowing, but it took hours before she finally regained her composure.

When she got home, she locked herself in her bedroom.

She watched the sun fall and come back up again.

It was too painful to sleep that night.

Hey guys, thanks so much for your thoughts on the last chapter! And thanks for reading this chapter. Thank you especially to all the suggestions, they are really helping me figure out the trajectory of the story. This chapter was a little on the darker side, but I promise it'll get better next chapter. Thanks again for reading and hope to hear what you think of this chapter!

4. Rejection And Resistance

'Aoi... Aoi... Wake up... Come on...'

'Mm?' the said girl grumbled. Last night, she stared at the ceiling until the sun came up again. The only reason she had fallen asleep was because her brain couldn't stay awake for a second longer. Was that around four in the morning? It was now seven in the morning. Her head was pounding and she did *not* want to be woken up right now.

'Aoi, wake up.' Akira repeated more sternly. He placed one hand on his sister's shoulder to shake her, but Aoi refused to get up. She clicked her tongue and buried her face in her pillow. 'Come on.' the older step sibling didn't give up. To him, Aoi's education was very important. He couldn't have her missing out on school.

Especially since her reputation as a student there was already tarnished to the staff.

'Aoi...'

'I feel sick.'

'You're feeling *lazy*. Get up, please.' he paused. 'Don't you want to have breakfast with me?'

At that, Aoi shot up. She flashed her brother a forced smile, but he saw right through her. Akira noticed the lack of light in her eyes. A part of him regretted being so harsh on her the other day, but he strong believed that his words were needed to knock some sense into her. But no matter what, he was upset to see Aoi like this. He almost wanted to ask about Yusaku Fujiki, but...

'I'd love to have breakfast with you, Onii-sama.'

Akira didn't want to bring that topic up again. He just wanted to go back to pretending like nothing happened. Like his sweet, innocent sister-in-law

who he always felt was more like his daughter, was still the same girl she was before she got involved with that guy.

But wasn't she?

It was a question he asked himself over and over later on when they ate together. He observed his sister from across the table; she was trying so hard to return to normalcy after the awkward scolding she received from him. The past few days have been hard on her. If he let her relax for today, even though the school principal might be bothered, would Aoi be able to somewhat heal?

'Aoi...' Akira began. 'How was school yesterday?'

Midway through lifting her teacup to her lips, Aoi's hands stiffened. A weightless feeling overcame her as memories of Yusaku's abrasive rejection yesterday flooded her mind. How was school? *How was school*? It was a fucking nightmare. She dreaded the thought of bumping into that man. 'Fine.' she forced a tight smile. 'It was fine.'

'I see... However, you look like you haven't gotten much sleep last night. Is something bothering you?'

'I was just thinking, Onii-sama.'

'About?'

'Nothing.' she sounded exasperated. She sighed and carded her fingers through her hair. It was difficult lying to her brother, but she wasn't about to give him more reasons to worry about her. 'Just trivial, stupid things.'

'Like what?'

'It's nothing, Onii-sama.'

'Is Fujiki Yusaku nothing?'

Startled, Aoi jolted in her seat. Her eyes flew up to meet her brother's, which were uncomfortably knowing. Every shred of denial and self-hate Aoi had been trying to repress since lost her virginity was poking at her from inside, like she had swallowed shards of glass. A weightless feeling overcame her and she felt like she was going to throw up.

She *hated* being reminded of Yusaku.

Not that she ever truly forgot about him. But it physically hurt her to hear his name out loud. Especially coming from her stepbrother, who had made it more than clear that he was disappointed in her.

When Aoi finally found the willpower to speak, she did so in barely a whisper, 'What was that, Onii-sama?'

'Were you thinking of that boy again?' Akira pressed. 'Did something happen between you two at school yesterday?'

'I-'

'Did he try to lure you in with sweet words.'

Sweet words? she thought painfully, *As if anything Yusaku says could be anything but hurtful!*

'You have to be careful of men like that, Aoi. They're experts at what they do.'

Aoi's eyes widened.

'I fucked you.' Yusaku had said. His deep, vibrant, emerald eyes were cruel, taunting. Like he just gained the upper hand in a game only he was aware they were both playing. 'So what? You're not a special girl. I won't cherish what happened between you and I.'

'Aoi... He's probably done to a million girls what he's done to you.'

'You're not a special girl.'

'I know you're thinking about him. But do you seriously think he's thinking about you in the same way?'

'I won't cherish what happened between you and I.'

'Aoi, do you think that man is actually serious about you?'

'There was no love or passion between us.'

Aoi could feel her heart breaking all over again.

'Has he even called-'

'I don't want to talk about it anymore.' Aoi interjected her brother with a shaky voice. She barely got the words out. But when they did tumble out of her mouth, she was unable to restrain herself from choking on her words. The emotion in her tone stunned Akira.

'Aoi?'

'I'm trying my best to get over it and make it up to you, but it's impossible with you waving it in front of me.' she fought back tears in her eyes, but her brother could see that she was suffering. 'I know that he doesn't love me. I know that you're disappointed that I had sex with a man that doesn't love me. I know that both you *and* him think I'm worthless and stupid, but I don't need to be reminded of that every single day!' she got up and beelined for the door leading out of the apartment.

'Aoi!' Akira called after his little sister, getting up from his seat as well.

'Have a nice day, Onii-sama!' she called out over her shoulder in a strained, forcibly chipper tone. 'Good luck at work!'

And with that, she was gone. Akira attempted to run after her, but the elevator doors closed before he could reach the corridor. Still, he smashed the button for the elevator in the hopes of the next one arriving quickly, but no matter what he did, time just kept bleeding.

Akira growled and punched the wall with a shaking fist. *Damn it*! What the hell?! What was the point of everything he'd done since he was sixteen if Aoi was just going to end up like this anyway?

She's not the same person, Akira thought, *She's torn apart.*

He had to fix her. Somehow, some way, he had to pick up the broken pieces of her and put her back together in an orderly fashion. But what would make her happy again? What did she need?

Akira had no idea how to relate to her.

That fact ate him up inside. No matter how hard he tried, he could never understand how Aoi feels.

'Hey, you spoke to that cutie yesterday, right?' Ai asked. It was in its Duel Disk form, attached to its master as he walked along the school campus. Classes were going to start soon, but Yusaku didn't seem to be in a rush. Even though his grades were fine, he wasn't exactly keen on exemplifying the ideal student. He could care less about how the faculty staff perceived him.

'Be quiet.'

'Well, you didn't bring me along when you spoke to her, so I have every right to ask!'

'No, you don't.'

'Come on!' Ai urged, attempting to an impression of a puppy's pitiful gaze. 'Tell me! Did you ask her out? Was it a love confession~?'

'Be *quiet*.'

'*Damn it*!' the AI sighed loudly. 'You're so tense when it comes to that girl. I mean, you're *always* tense, but bringing that sweetie up is the equivalent of

sticking a pole up your-'

'Oh hey, you! Good morning!' Naoki Shima's was thunderous. His voice could be heard in every corner of the school, but it was prominent right behind Yusaku. So the stoic duelist turned around, thinking that his classmate was talking to him, but was surprised to instead see that Naoki was waving to Aoi Zaizen, who was seated at the school's fountain. She was hunched over and clutching her stomach. Was she ill?

'Good morning.' Aoi greeted Naoki politely. Though she was trying to save face, Yusaku noticed that there were dark bags under her eyes. Perhaps she really was feeling sick.

'Am I gonna see you at the Duel Club later?' the shorter student beamed.

'I don't think so.' Aoi's voice was weak. 'I'm not feeling well.'

'I can tell.' Naoki frowned. 'Why don't you just go home?'

'It's fine... My classes are important.'

'Wah! You're a model student, Zaizen!'

Aoi waved her hand dismissively, but Naoki couldn't take a hint. He sat beside her and began chatting away. The girl was visibly distressed; she angled herself away from Naoki and remained in her semi-fetal position, her arms never once uncrossing from her stomach.

'She's messed up.' Ai observed. Yusaku said nothing. After a pause, Ai spoke again, '*You* messed her up.'

'It's for her own good.'

'Do you really believe that?'

'Yes.' he was firm, but his eyes were glassy with sadness. 'If she was with me, she'd be crying all the time.'

'She cries now, without you.'

Yusaku's chest tightened. It was obvious that Aoi loved him, and that rejecting her had taken a toll on her heart. But Yusaku didn't think that he was anything to cry over. She should be happy not to be saddled with him. She was too good to be burdened with his vengeful spirit. Though it pained him too, he'd rather her remain as she is; pure, with a good life ahead of her.

She'd have no future with him.

'It's only temporary. She'll get over it.' Yusaku attempted an air of nonchalance, but Ai could read that its master was bothered by the situation.

'She'll get over *you*, you mean.' Ai quipped.

'Sure.'

'Is that something you're OK with?'

'Why wouldn't I be?'

'Because getting over you means she doesn't love you anymore.'

Yusaku didn't respond. With one last look at the suffering Aoi, he turned on his heel and made his way to class.

'You alright there?' Kusanagi attempted to pry into Yusaku's business while the two were typing away at the computers inside the hotdog truck. The older man sensed that his partner was off as soon as he entered, but knew better than to just ask outright. Yusaku was like a cat; poke too hard or too many times and it would swipe at you before scampering off.

'I'm fine.' Yusaku replied without taking his eyes off of the screen. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'I'm just asking how you are.'

'Like I said, I'm fine.'

Kusanagi sighed, defeated. 'Alright.'

Silence befell them. Even Ai didn't make a sound. Only the light noise of typing could be heard.

Later into the night, a pop-up of a LINK VRAINS broadcast appeared on one of the screens. Normally, Yusaku ignored it, but today, he was *interested*. It was apparently a duel between Blue Angel and an unknown challenger. The emcee mentioned the foe's name, but Yusaku failed to remember it. He was just thankful that he could observe Aoi back in her element; in LINK VRAINS, where she was happy and free.

Knowing that Aoi was Blue Angel and that she and Yusaku had history now, Kusanagi bit his tongue. He didn't comment on the match, nor did he say anything about Yusaku not deleting the pop-up broadcast from the monitor. But throughout the entire duel, Kusanagi stole glances at Yusaku. The vendor was surprised to see flashes of emotion in Yusaku's eyes; but which emotions?

A lot of admiration.

Sometimes a bit of excitement.

A little bit of happiness.

Mostly pain.

Blue Angel's opponent now had only 100 LP left. Seeing this as an opportunity to gloat, the idol sped on her board so that she was riding side-by-side with her opponent. Her foe's avatar was that of a normal, human man in tights. It was an unexciting get up, but it was realistic enough for Aoi to consider him a candidate to join her in the show she wanted to put on.

'You're going to lose.' Blue Angel taunted in a seductively syrupy tone. 'You know that, right?'

Despite being jeered at, the avatar blushed madly. 'We don't know that yet!'

'Oh, but I do!' she laughed. Adrenaline was rushing through her. Did she really want to do this? Without another thought, she reached out to grab her contender by the arm. Then, she yanked him forwards so that he hopped over onto her board. Startled by the movement, he struggled to regain his balance - and Blue Angel saw it as an opportunity. She steadied him with her arms, carefully sliding her palms onto his chest as soon as he steadied himself. 'Careful!' she beamed. 'You could have fallen!'

The avatar was beet-red in the face. 'W-Wh-Wha-'

'Then who would keep me company?' she continued, swinging her arms over his neck to pull him into a tight embrace. 'And here I thought you'd be the hero that could stay with me forever!'

Back within the confines of Kusanagi's truck, Yusaku was seconds away from an aneurysm.

'What is she *doing*?' Yusaku was furious. He stood up and banged his palm against the table. His lips were pulled back in a snarl to reveal teeth that were so tightly clenched, one would have thought he'd crush them to dust. Youthful, green eyes were wide and vibrant with rage.

'Are you jealous?' Ai teased. The AI was not-so-secretly on Aoi's side; after all, according to its extensive database, Aoi was the one more likely to be in pain. So Ai wasn't going to pass up this moment to ruffle its master's feathers.

'*Shut up*.' Yusaku snapped back, but his eyes were still glued to the screen. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Was Blue Angel seriously flirting with her opponent on a live broadcast?

'Hey, hey...' Kusanagi cleared his throat in an effort to calm his partner down. 'Come on, now. You know she's an idol, so she has to play up her fans... This is all probably part of a gimmick.'

'But she doesn't have to *touch* him!' Yusaku's voice rose, prompting Ai and Kusanagi to glance at each other wearily. Neither had ever seen the normally stoic Yusaku get upset over anything other than the Knights of Hanoi, so this was a strange situation that no one knew how to navigate. Kusanagi felt earlier that perhaps Yusaku was just overprotective of Aoi and that this frustration of his would pass with time. But after this outburst, he wasn't quite so sure that was the case.

Inside, Yusaku was so much more than just frustrated. *Inside*, he was *seething*. His blood was boiling so hot that he felt as if his skin might melt off.

'You should sit back down, Yusaku-chan.' Ai hummed. 'You had your turn.'

A little embarrassed, Yusaku slowly took his seat, but his gaze never left the monitor. He took a few deep breaths in, then he spoke again in a calm manner, 'There are three possible reasons for her to behave this way. First, she's bored and sees this as some convoluted way of having fun. Second, she's trying to repaint her image as Blue Angel into something more interactive. Third...' his hands clenched into fists. 'She knows I'm watching and is taking a dig at me.'

'That's probably it.' Ai stated plainly.

'Fine.' Yusaku's jaw was tight. He reached into his pocket to pull out his phone.

'Woah, *woah*! Hold on!' Kusanagi raised his arms. 'Yusaku, what are you doing?!'

'I'm unblocked her so I can call her.'

'Why?!' Kusanagi was panicking.

'Why *not*?' Yusaku refused to back down.

'You're angry! She's angry! You're both angry and shouldn't be talking right now!'

'I am *not* angry!'

'You seem pretty angry to me!' Ai interjected. 'According to my database-'

'Shut up before I terminate you.' Yusaku hissed.

'Hey, lame-o.' Ai continued with a newfound confidence. 'She blocked you. Since I'm connected to your network, I can see that any signals you send her will bounce right back.'

'Then forcibly unblock me!'

Ai sighed, but did as he was told.

Despite Kusanagi's protests, Yusaku stepped out of the truck with his phone up to his ear. Aoi logged out of LINK VRAINS right after she won, so she should be able to hear her phone by now. Yusaku knew that the chances of her picking his call up were slim, but they were better than nothing.

Surprisingly, Aoi picked up on the fifth ring.

'What are you trying to pull?' Yusaku barked into the phone.

'I have no idea what you're talking about.' she answered back politely. Her voice was her usual light, impeccably sweet tone and Yusaku fought to ignore the tightness in his chest.

'Where are you?' he pressed. 'I need to talk to you.'

Silence. Yusaku could hear his angry heart beating in his eardrums. When she spoke again, she sounded furious herself, 'I can come to you.'

As if touched by magic, Yusaku's anger subsided and he regained a feeling of collectedness. He went into this conversation thinking that he was going to get into an argument, but he genuinely wanted to have a discussion with Aoi now. He didn't like where they left off. He thought that if he pushed her away by hurting her that she would never want to speak with him again. The fact that she proved him wrong and is even willing to meet with him touched him. Nothing had really touched his soul before other than observing Aoi's close relationship with Akira.

To Yusaku, it always seemed like Aoi was a constant reminder in his life that there was good in humanity. That even though his past was terrible, inflicted on him by evil people - that good people did exist.

It was fucking with his mind.

'Yusaku?'

'You can come to my place.' he said calmly. 'I'll give you the address...'

Hey guys, thank you so much for all the feedback from last chapter! Most of this chapter was a little dark, but I wanted to show some hope in the last portion. Yusaku and Aoi have a lot of stuff to hash out, but I think that when I was writing the characters, I couldn't imagine them not arguing in the beginning stages. I always feel like Yusaku resists when people try to approach him. Considering that Aoi tried to approach him in the most intimate way possible, Yusaku reacted with more resistance.

Again, thanks so much for reading and I hope to see what you guys think of this chapter!

5. Bad Boy

Yusaku waited for Aoi by the steps of his run-down apartment building. He entered his unit earlier to lock Ai in a case, after which he decided that it would be best if he was outside to meet Aoi when she came by. After all, the building had no way to buzz him for communication nor would she be able to enter without a key. He made sure to lock Ai up in the glass compartment.

It's deathly silent, he thought to himself.

The sky was dark and starless and the streets were ominously empty. It didn't feel like he was in a real world; it felt like he was inside a painting crafted by a very lonely individual.

Is this the world I've made for myself?

Then, the light, steady sound of footsteps approaching broke the stillness of his environment. Yusaku turned his head to the side to be greeted by the sight of Aoi Zaizen, still in her school uniform, with her arms folded across her chest.

They stared at each other in uncomfortable silence. The tension between them was palpable.

Aoi's thoughts wandered. Once her eyes met his, she felt weightless. But her chest tightened and there was a hollow sensation in her stomach like someone gouged her insides out. It was painful to look at him.

You're not a special girl.

I won't cherish what happened between you and I.

There was no love or passion between us.

Yusaku's cold words rang loud and clear in her mind.

She shivered at their iciness.

'Are you cold?' Yusaku asked softly. Aoi's heart fluttered. His voice sounded empathetic just then. But rather than believe for a second that he cared about her well-being, she shook her head and dismissed his concern as politeness.

'A little.' she admitted.

'We can go inside.'

'Sure.'

That initial piece of conversation between them was nothing more than a short exchange of colloquial words, but the tension between them was growing. When Yusaku stood up and keyed the building door open, they could both feel the tension on their shoulders. Then when they climbed the stairs up to his unit, that same weight kept pushing down on their bodies until every step into Yusaku's room felt like walking with lead shackles attached to their ankles.

Aoi's first look inside Yusaku's room sent a dark lick up her spine. Her heart broke for him. Was this seriously where he lived? To say the least, it was run-down and empty. Was his life so consumed by vengeance that he couldn't even bother investing time and effort into filling his room with some fragments of his character?

Aoi thought that was a shame. There were so many qualities about him that she loved and wished people could see too; his sense of justice, implicit kindness, and commitment to responsibility.

'So...' she spoke up. 'What did you want to talk to me about?'

Yusaku was freaking out. What was the point of calling her here? To express how pissed off he was that she was flirting with other guys even though she had every right to do so.

He decided then that this meeting was a miscalculation on his end. When he invited her over, he acted purely on emotion. How could he have been so weak?

'Were you bothered?' she whispered. 'When Blue Angel-'

'No.' he said a little too quickly.

'But you called me.' she insisted, walking over to him. Instinctively, he stepped backwards. She noticed that and the sting of rejection struck her again. 'I don't get you.' she uncrossed her arms. 'Why are you warm to me one minute and then cold the next? You make me feel like you care about me but then you pull away. Did I do something wrong?'

He remained silent.

'Do you hate me?' she asked sadly.

'You were flirting with your opponent a while ago.' Yusaku accused with cold eyes, completely ignoring her questions. '*Why*?'

'I was just having fun.'

'Were you just having fun, or were you trying to get my attention?'

Aoi's brow twitched at that. 'Not everything I do is motivated by you.'

'So then, why?'

She shrugged. 'I wanted to feel wanted.'

'I see.' he was burning inside, but he remained stoic because he didn't want her to see how affected he was by her actions. 'Because I rejected you, you sought to be desired by others.'

'You have no right to lecture me about that.' her tone turned angry; a spark that surprised (but also challenged) Yusaku. 'You told me that I was just like

any other girl to you. So why should I treat you as special from other guys? How is it that you have the right to be upset about that and I don't?'

'I'm *not* upset.'

'But you *are*!' she was exasperated. 'Why else would you call me here?!'

'*I don't know*.' he hissed, clearly riled up by Aoi's own anger.

'So I'm just supposed to crawl over to you whenever you whistle like I'm your *dog*?!'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'But that's how you make me feel! You give me attention when it suits your needs but then you spit me out right after you chew me up!'

'*Enough*.'

'*No!* I'm not going to obey you blindly! You're not Onii-sama! I don't *have* to listen to you! And you have no right to treat me like this, it's disgusting!'

'If you find me so unpleasant, you shouldn't associate yourself with me any longer.' Yusaku snapped back, turning red in the face. It was taking all of his self-control not to cuss her out right now. She know just which buttons to press to make him feel vulnerable.

'Then stop making it harder to get away from you!' she fisted his school jacket and he thought for a second that she would hit him. Although she didn't, he observed that tears were pooling in her eyes. And even though her hands were clenched into the fabric of his uniform, her fingers were shaking and her grip was loose. 'You know how I feel about you.' she choked. 'Yet, you still treat me so cruelly! I'm not your toy! I have worth! I'm a human being! The way I feel about you shouldn't be an excuse for you to treat me like I'm not human!'

'That is *exactly* what intimidates me!' he said without thinking. 'You're too human and I can't give you what you deserve!'

Aoi clenched her teeth. Her tears betrayed her; they seeped from the corners of her eyes. 'Don't try to make this look like you're doing me a favour by being a jerk to me! I don't want you to give me anything.' she sobbed as she trembled all over, overcome with emotion. 'I don't care about what you think I do or don't deserve.'

'Please-'

'I just want you to *love* me.'

'I can't.' he answered honestly, his voice turning soft and uncharacteristically gentle.

Aoi's heart dropped. 'Why not?'

'Because there's no space in my heart for that.' he paused. 'There's no space in my heart for you.'

'Why not? *Why not*?'

'Because I don't want *you*. I want revenge.'

Aoi let out a strange sound; something akin to a wounded moan, but sounded more like a whine. She covered her mouth with a hand and steadied herself with a palm on Yusaku's chest. Her shoulders were shaking, but only deep breathing could be heard from her. Yusaku couldn't see her face from this angle. It was worrying him. He cupped her face with both hands and lifted her visage up so that he could take a look at her, but he was unprepared for her broken features. The whites of her eyes were flooded in tears and her lips were shivering as though she were cold. He knew, of course, that it was because she was in pain.

He didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. He simply stared back at her with an unreadable expression. She couldn't tell if he felt sorry for her or

amused by her plight.

'I don't know what to do.' Aoi said chokingly. 'I still love you.'

Yusaku's breath caught in his throat. He could never get used to her saying that.

'What was the point of calling me over here?' she continued. 'Do you just like hurting me?'

'I never *want* to hurt you.' he said firmly. 'That, I can promise you.'

'You're lying.'

He shook his head. 'No. I care about you, no matter how small the extent may seem to be.'

In her naivety, Aoi took his words too sincerely. She allowed her heart to flutter again and she was melting into his hands. The little sliver of affection he gave her just now gave her the confidence to lean upwards and kiss him.

Yusaku stiffened at the contact. Aoi's lips massaged his slowly, but he refused to do anything back - although it was taking all his willpower to do so. But when he felt the tip of her tongue wet slip into the slight parting of his lips, he shut his eyes and return her kiss with full blown passion. His hands left her face to rest on either side of her hips and he fisted the fabric of her school skirt, pulling it slightly up to her waist. His fingers brushed the skin of her thighs and she whimpered involuntarily at the warm contact. The sound she made excited Yusaku even more; so much so that he growled into her mouth and took her by the waist, turning her around so that he could push her up against the wall.

Please forgive me, he thought in passing as he made the conscious decision to repeat his past mistakes. He liked to think of himself as someone who didn't need any warmth from people, but it was impossible to resist someone he had feelings for. Even though he knew that tomorrow, she'd be

crying and he'd be empty, he couldn't find the strength in him to drive her away - even if it was for both their sake's.

He kissed her deeper, as deep as his tongue could go, pushing the back of her head up against the concrete and clacking their teeth together. When she regained some self-awareness, she wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him closer still. In turn, his own hands snaked up from underneath her school top and underwire of her bra to knead her breasts. She squeaked and that was enough for Yusaku to snap back to composure.

Green eyes opened wide, as if he were shocked by his own actions. Immediately, he retrieved his hands and pushed himself away from her.

'What's wrong?' she was breathing hard.

'This is a mistake.'

'But-'

'This means nothing to me.' he sounded almost angry. 'You know that, right?'

'Yes.'

'Then why?'

'Because it means something to me.' she walked over to his bed, discarding her jacket and sweater to the floor as she moved along. 'It's something *I* want to do with you.'

'I can never return your feelings.'

'This isn't about your feelings. It's about mine.'

Yusaku watched with a quickening heartbeat as Aoi discarded article after article of clothing. Her back was turned to him so that he wouldn't see how nervous she was. When everything had gone from her upper body except for her bra, she took a deep breath and undid that as well. She heard Yusaku

stifle a gasp. It gave her confidence momentarily, until she remembered that he had told her that he wasn't attracted to her.

She shook her head. This wasn't the time to second guess herself.

'I didn't mean it.' Yusaku spoke slowly, every word cutting through the thick air.

Aoi's heart skipped a beat. 'What?'

'When I said that you aren't special...' Yusaku's footsteps approached her from behind. 'I didn't mean it.'

'Yusaku-'

He stopped right behind her, but didn't touch her. But she could feel his body's heat on her like an invisible force. His breath fanned the back of her head and she wondered if he could sense the butterflies in her stomach. Despite her anxiety, she had to ask him a question that had been eating away at her.

'Do you think I'm pretty?'

Yusaku's jaw dropped. 'W-What?' he stammered.

'Do you think I'm pretty?' she repeated, softer. Tears were forming in her eyes again and she cursed herself for being so emotional.

Silence befell them.

She felt his fingers caress her bare sides. She jumped a little at the sudden contact, but he pressed his chest up against her back to keep her in place. She could feel the rabbit-quick thumping of his heart and it gave her comfort knowing that he was just as nervous, excited, and passionate as her in this moment. He drew slow, tantalizing circles from under her breasts, down her navel, until they settled on her abdomen.

'Yusaku...'

'Yes.'

Her heart skipped a beat.

'*Yes*.' he repeated, dipping a hand underneath her skirt and underwear. 'You're *beautiful*.' he added, his fingers parting her. His eyes shut and he exhaled deeply when he realized how wet she was for him. He prodded her entrance and she squirmed, moaning and purposely pressing her ass against the erection straining against his pants. His other hand came up to fondle one of her breasts. Overcome with the emotion of touching someone he had feelings for, he absent-mindedly kissed the side of her face. The chaste gesture wasn't lost on Aoi; she bit her lip. Yusaku dropped his mouth to her ear and whispered into it huskily, 'Aoi...'

Aoi whimpered.

She loved the way her name rolled off his tongue.

'Turn around.' he pleaded, moving his hands so that he could wrap his arms around her waist from behind. 'I want to look at you.'

He let her go and she did as she was told. She saw him lick his lips as he scanned her up and down; she loved the attention he was giving her. She unhooked her skirt and let it drop to the floor, her body covered only by her panties. Then, she sat herself on his bed and scooted up so that she was laying down on the mattress in full view.

But clearly illuminated by the moonlight, Yusaku could see the blacks and blues of where he had sucked and bitten her a little too hard.

His expression turned grim.

'Yusaku?' Aoi called out, suddenly very self-conscious. 'Is something wrong?'

'Did I do that to you?'

'What?'

'The bruises on your body. Did I do that to you?'

Aoi didn't answer, but Yusaku already knew anyway.

'I hurt you.'

'That's-'

'I'm sorry.' he said sincerely, evidently angry with himself. He leaned over and fingered the straps of her underwear, pulling it down gently. 'I never, ever want to do that to you.'

'Hey...' she was confused. 'It's fine. We were messing around.'

'No, I...' he looked sad. 'I don't want to leave marks on you.'

'Whether or not they can be seen, you'll still leave them on me.'

'But I hope the marks I do leave make you as happy as the ones you leave on me.'

At first, she had no idea what he meant. It was only after he undressed and climbed on top of her, kissing her body with gentle, open-moused kisses that she finally understood his feelings. His touch was so feathery, his movements so slow and *loving* that she lost herself in what she thought was his genuine desire for her. Of course, she wasn't wrong - but Yusaku was never going to explicitly tell her how he felt about her.

'Aoi...' he grunted as he grinded his hips against hers. His hard length was warm against her thigh and she adjusted herself so that he was now sliding up and down her wet slit. He cursed aloud while her juices coated him until he finally could no longer hold himself back. He gave her a deep kiss before positioning himself at her entrance.

'Wait.' she squirmed. 'Wait, wait-'

He retreated immediately and cupped her face. 'What's wrong?'

'I want to be on top.'

He nodded and allowed her straddle his hips as he lay on his back. However, he was unprepared for the merciless view. From this angle, he could see everything; even how he disappeared inside of her as she lowered herself on him. Aoi moaned and he felt her tighten around him. His heartbeat quickened, but he refused to move for fear of hurting her. But it was absolute torture; watching her work him into her. He wasn't confident that he could last much longer.

She inhaled sharply and finally slid all of him inside of her. Yusaku threw his head back and his hips thrusted upwards involuntarily. '*Damn it*.' he cursed, wishing that he could just fuck her senseless then and there. But he loved her; he really, truly loved her and he wasn't going to take control back away from her in this situation. Aoi, however, could clearly see how difficult it was for him to hold back. The muscles of his toned stomach were flexing in restraint and his teeth were clenched hard.

'Does it feel good?' Aoi asked in a sweetly innocent voice, but her palms were on his abdomen and she started a punishing pace up and down his shaft.

Yusaku observed a flash of Blue Angel just then; a soul that was confident, alluring, and absolutely merciless in her teasing. It was a turn-on to see the usually timid school girl be as enthusiastic as her online self, especially in a sexual context. 'Yes.' he answered, happy for now to submit to her. His hands found their way to the top of her thighs, squeezing them in appreciation. Then he asked, 'Do *you* feel good?'

'Mm, yes...' she leaned backwards so that he could see where they connected in full view. His breath caught in his throat.

'Aoi.' he hissed. His body was slick from sweat and he knew for certain that his end was near. 'I won't last much longer.'

Aoi flashed him a playful smile, reminiscent of her VR personality. 'Oh, no... Were you that frustrated today?'

'No.' he licked his lips, but his strikingly handsome gaze burns into hers. 'But you're just so beautiful.'

Aoi's heart fluttered and her pace slowed. Her expression was so surprised that it broke Yusaku's concrete heart.

'You're beautiful.' he repeated, now aware that she wasn't used to be doing told that. She didn't say anything back, but continued looking at him with a broken face. He saw tears glisten in her eyes and so he instinctively pulled her to him so that he could kiss her deeply. 'My... beautiful... baby.' he whispered in between gasps of air. 'Aoi...'

'I love you.'

'I *know*.' he choked. His arms wrapped around her and he thrusted in and out of her, feeling a wave of pride with every moan and mewl that tore itself from her throat. The wet sounds of their lovemaking echoed erotically in the room and Aoi was on the edge of climax. The sounds Yusaku made excited Aoi even more; deep, guttural half-moans half-whines, like her lover was finding it hard to breathe, like he was about to cry, like he was dying.

'A-Ah...!' Aoi screamed into his chest. 'Yusaku...!'

She came apart in his arms and he followed, burying his groans into her hair. As her tremors subsided, Aoi lifted her body up by her palms and kissed her lover softly, trying to show rather than tell him how much she loved him. Her displays of affection touched Yusaku's heart.

She really is an angel, he thought to himself, *A perfect, sweet, beautiful angel...*

After a few minutes of kissing, Yusaku turned his head to the side and cleared his throat. Perplexed, Aoi tried kissing him again but he pushed her

away. Her heart dropped. She understood what was going on.

Aoi stood up and began dressing herself. Yusaku put his trousers on, but didn't bother with anything else. He watched her clothe herself with her back turned to him. They did this in awkward silence until Aoi hunched over and started crying after she put her school jacket on.

Yusaku knew why she was upset.

But it was for the better in his eyes.

'I don't get it.' she sobbed. 'I feel that you love me. I felt it just now, so why do you reject me?'

'Sex isn't love.' Yusaku replied coldly.

'But I felt it.' she insisted. 'I felt your passion. How could you be that passionate with someone you don't love?'

'You're a beautiful woman. I'm not going to turn down an opportunity to sleep with you.'

Aoi felt like she was going to cry again, but held it in. She wasn't going to shed another tear tonight, not for him. If he was going to keep rejecting her like this, there was nothing she could do. No matter how much her intuition begged to differ with Yusaku's words, she had to stop this and move on. This was only confusing her more. One minute, it feels like she's his entire world and the next, she might as well be the dust that collects under his bed.

But she chooses to believe in the good moments they shared.

'You know...' she looked over her shoulder and smiled sadly at him. 'I'm glad we met.'

Yusaku's chest tightened.

'Sayonara, Fujiki Yusaku.'

And she was off. The door slammed shut behind her on her way out and once more, Yusaku found himself alone. He took a long shower afterwards and told himself over and over again that returning Aoi's affection would only bring him more pain. He had no future. His past was taken away from him. He was a product of his own trauma and he would never be able to lead a normal life. He still woke up at night sometimes in a cold sweat, burning with the demons of his childhood. Aoi deserved better than him. He couldn't bear the idea of being with her and then watching her drift away from him as she realizes that he isn't good enough for her. It would hurt him - and her - too much.

But somehow, he was starting to believe that the pain might be worth it.

Should he cast aside his quest for vengeance and-

No, he thought angrily, *I can't do that to her. She should be with someone normal. Not me. Not someone without a future.*

Aoi stepped out of the building and into the dead of night. She thought that no one would be out at this hour, but a voice proved her wrong.

'Zaizen Aoi-san.' Emma Bessho called from the bottom of the steps. She smiled with warm eyes. 'Let's have a girl's talk.'

Hey guys, thanks so much for your thoughts and suggestions! They help me so much and I hope that you enjoy the final product. *poetrymagic12* helped me come up with the idea for this chapter, so credits to them for helping me out! Sorry this was a longer chapter, but there were so many emotions I wanted to include in the lemon. I thought it was an opportunity to highlight how the characters feel about each other; their insecurities and the pain of loving someone who you know loves you back but refuses to have faith in your relationship.

Someone asked if Emma was going to make an appearance in this story, and this chapter was her introduction to the plot. She's going to

play a bigger role so I hope you guys enjoy her presence in the story.

Thank you guys again for all the support. It encourages me and I hope that you still enjoy reading.

6. No Love

Hey guys! Please read this note before beginning this chapter.

Based on the new episode, I felt that I had to change the last part of this chapter to suit Yusaku's personality more. Looking back at the original version of this chapter, I felt that Yusaku was very OOC at the end. Even though I want to get the ball rolling on these two being a couple in this story, I don't want to write gratuitously and have things not make sense. That is why I changed the latter part of this chapter. Even if it takes longer, I want to continue writing the characters as close to their personalities as possible because I feel like the ending will be more satisfying.

poetrymagic12 pitched the idea for this edit to me a while ago. So thanks to them!

Thanks so much for understanding and I hope to read what you guys have to say about the edited version of this chapter!

Oh, and to OWO, that is an interesting idea and I will take it into consideration! Thanks!

To the Guest reviewer, this story takes place in an alternate arc. Thanks for asking!

'Akira sent me to spy on you.' Emma Bessho explained. She and Aoi Zaizen were seated on a bench overlooking the ocean. The large body of water was dimly lit, although they could see that it was eerily still; calming but nerve-wracking at the same time - for the must have been something lurking beneath the depths. Emma thought that the ocean at nighttime was much like Aoi herself; seemingly collected and put together, but chaotic inside. Nonetheless, both the ocean and Aoi carried their chaos with grace.

'So...' Aoi began. 'What did you see?'

'Just you and that boy walking in that building. I wasn't going to invade *that* far into your privacy. I was a teenager too, you know.'

Aoi's cheeks burned.

Emma smiled. 'But judging from your face when you stepped out, it seems that he broke your heart.'

The younger girl inhaled sharply before responding, 'You're going to tell Onii-sama, aren't you?'

'I don't have to tell him more than what I actually saw. And all I really saw was you two walking into that building. Aside from that... Well, I can't report what I didn't see.'

'But you said you could tell-'

'I'm not going to tell Akira.' Emma reassured her. 'It wouldn't benefit you or him to know that information. I know it feels like he's overstepping his boundaries, but he worries about you. In the end, I think Akira just wants you to be happy.' she said in her soothing, almost singsong voice. She looked up at the starless sky and wondered where those beautiful, astral lights were hiding during this tumultuous time. 'Believe me... There's nothing more important to Akira than your happiness.'

Aoi frowned. 'Why does everyone assume I'm not happy?'

Emma laughed. 'Because it's obvious that you aren't!'

'But why does everyone assume that I'm not happy because of one guy?'

'Aren't you?'

'I haven't been happy for a very long time.' Aoi admitted with such forward nonchalance that Emma's perpetual smile was wiped clean off her face. The vivacious spy's gaze shot right to her client's stepsister, who looked uncharacteristically defiant. It amused Emma, as well as relieved her

somewhat. It seems that Akira's strict, protective upbringing couldn't quell the fire in this young lady.

'But aren't you extra unhappy because of this guy you're seeing?'

'That's none of your business.' Aoi was firm. 'Getting involved with him is something that I decided for myself.'

'You made the conscious decision to suffer?'

'It's not always like that.' Aoi crossed her arms over her chest defensively. 'It's just... Sometimes it's worth it.'

'So you're saying it's worth it to be this guy's personal punching bag so as long as he makes you feel like he wants you?' Emma waved her hand dismissively. Her theatrically flippant attitude was bothering Aoi; as if the older woman was writing this off as a typical, teenage spat. Aoi could tell that Emma was assuming that either herself or Yusaku was simply playing hard-to-get.

'It's not that straight-forward.'

'How could it not be straight-forward? If two people want each other, then-'

'He *doesn't* want me.'

'Oh?' Emma raised a brow. However, her expression turned uncharacteristically grim. She paused, trying to figure out a way to best approach this clearly delicate situation without offending her junior. Eventually, she decided to go ahead and be offensive anyway. Perhaps a little bit of shock value would be the best way to reach Aoi Zaizen's heart. 'Why would you give yourself to someone who doesn't want you?'

'I didn't do it for him!' Aoi's voice rose. 'I did it for *myself.* Because *I* wanted him and *I* have feelings for him. *I* wanted to be intimate with him.'

Emma nodded slowly to show that she understood. Then, she inhaled deeply as she prepared to ask what she knew would be a question that opened a can of worms. *Why do I bother this?* she thought to herself, *I'm like an old lady...* 'But shouldn't you want better for yourself?'

Aoi looked as if she had been slapped across the face.

'Do you really think so low of yourself to allow that man to use you?' Emma continued. 'I don't know the details, but it's obvious that you aren't a priority to him - and that fact makes you unhappy. You're chasing after someone who wants nothing to do with you.'

'T-That's...'

'You say that you're doing it for yourself... But that's not entirely true, is it? If you were really putting yourself first, you'd realize that you deserve better. Look at how much you're hurting yourself... If you allow yourself to be this hurt, I can't imagine how Akira must be feeling right now.'

Aoi's eyes widened. 'Onii-sama?' Up until now, she was under the impression that Akira was angry about her and Yusaku because of his status at SOL Technologies. Never did it cross her mind that her older brother was in pain because *she* was in pain. She didn't even realize that Akira could *see* that she was in pain.

'He's been fighting for ten years now to protect you from the world.' Emma stood up and began mounting her motorcycle. 'But what's the point of you yourself are going to be the one to shoot yourself in the head?'

'Wait!' Aoi rose to her feet as well.

'Go home to your Nii-sama.' she geared up with her helmet. 'Hop on the back. I'll take you back to him.'

'I know you can't sleep.' Ai broke the silent atmosphere of the room from its place on the glass compartment.

'Be quiet.' Yusaku mumbled from under the covers of his bed. 'You're interfering with my ability to do so.'

Ai obeyed for a long moment. When it spoke again, it wasted no time in approaching the topic it knew its master secretly wanted to talk to someone about. Not that Yusaku would ever admit that he ever needed people or things to work his emotions out with. Heck, he didn't even want to acknowledge that he was at all a sentient being. But Ai itself was worried for the girl that was just over. She was in serious pain when she left, which it knew meant that its master was also suffering.

'That cutie loves you.'

'Don't go there.' Yusaku warned.

'You love her too.'

'Don't...'

'When she's in front of you, everything else might as well not exist to you. But you're just using that poor girl.' Ai said without accusation. It was simply stating a fact that no one thus far had wanted to address but that everyone was fully aware of. 'To make yourself less lonely, you push her further into her own loneliness.'

Yusaku remained silent.

'Like a kicked puppy, she'll keep coming back to you.' Ai continued. 'And you're going to keep bringing her to her knees until she can't get up anymore.'

'You're wrong.' Yusaku sat up to look at Ai. 'I have no intention of seeing Zaizen Aoi ever again.'

'That's what you said last time. And look how you two ended up tonight.'

'I was weak.' he reasoned. 'But I won't make the same mistake-'

'*What* mistake?' Ai was exasperated. 'You like her, don't you? Well, she's *in love* with you! Nothing that happened between you guys is a mistake. This is how things are supposed to be. The only mistake is you trying to deny your feelings for her!'

'I don't have feelings.' Yusaku hissed defensively. 'I don't need warmth from people and I most certainly don't need warmth from her!'

'Necessity is not the same as desire. You *want* her and you can't handle the fact that you want someone.'

'She deserves better.'

'She wants *you*.'

'No.' he clenched his hands into fists. 'I'll never be good enough for her.'

But the way Aoi looked at him with intensely dangerous longing as he held her in his arms was burned to the back of his eyelids. Aoi wouldn't leave him, not even in his own fucking thoughts. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see her eyes brimming with admiration for him. He could feel her hands roaming his back, her legs draped over his hips, her lips planting hot kisses on his neck. He could even swear that his room still smelled sweetly of her fresh, fruity scent.

There was no way he could sleep like this. Not while he was trapped in a dream he could never realistically have.

And why not?

She loved him. She said so herself.

He loved her back.

Why couldn't he just...

He growled and buried his face in his hands.

Am I selfish enough to cage her? he wondered, *Being with me would mean joining me in the prison that is my trauma...*

It was way past midnight when Aoi finally made it back home. The elevators parted when she reached her floor, but she was surprised to see that the apartment was still well lit. She tried her best to not make any noise as she walked into the living room, which she had to get past in order to go to her room. Light as a feather, she walked on her tiptoes. But as she made her way, the sight of her brother greeted her. Akira was seated at the end of the long dining table. His hands were folded, his elbows propped on the wood, and his expression one of exhaustion.

Aoi stopped in her tracks.

'Onii-sama, I-'

'Don't.' Akira raised a hand to silence her. She thought he might lecture her, but his eyes were weary and his voice was oddly soft. 'I'm just glad you came home tonight.'

Aoi's heart filled with comfort.

'I'm sorry.' she said anyway. 'I don't want you to worry about me. But this is something I wanted to do for myself.'

'It is my nightmare to see you hurt, Aoi.' Akira choked. Tears were glistening at the rims of his eyes. A few seconds went by before he allowed them to fall. He wiped them away with his thumbs.

'Onii-sama...' Aoi took a seat beside him. 'I don't want to see you like this. I don't want you to be upset or worry about me. I... I can hold out on my own.'

'But I don't want you to do that!' Akira banged his fist on the table. 'I don't want you to be alone, not ever! But in this situation, you keep pushing me away. You don't talk to me. I don't where you run off to in the middle of the

night. I'm left here, just thinking about all the different ways that man is hurting you-'

'He doesn't hurt me.' she interjected, though her voice was soft. Akira was taken aback but also calmed by the clear control she had over her emotions. Especially considering that last time they spoke about this topic, she all but exploded in front of him.

'You want me to believe that he treats you with care and warmth?'

'That doesn't matter. I want you to believe in *me*.'

Akira swallowed a hard lump in his throat. 'I just don't want you to get hurt.'

'I know.'

'Are you hurt?'

Aoi smiled. 'No.'

'He doesn't hurt you? Not ever?'

'Maybe it hurts for a while.' she admitted. 'But only for a little while. Because when I think about him... It makes me happy.'

'Why does he make you happy?'

'Because he loves me.' she reached out and held Akira's hand in hers.

'If he loves you, why does he hurt you?'

As if struck by lightning, Aoi quickly withdrew her hand. Her face fell and she looked back at Akira with great pain in her eyes. 'That's...' she didn't know how to answer. Akira was right. Emma was right. Heck, even Yusaku was right! Everyone but herself seemed to have more logic than her, and yet she couldn't shake off the feeling that Yusaku loved her back.

The way he looks at her when she undresses.

The way he whispers her name into her ear.

The way he accepts her love so willingly.

How could he not love her? How, when there was so much passion reflected in his warm gaze?

More importantly, why was everyone around her dictating how she ought to feel?

'Go to bed.' Akira commanded, breaking into her thoughts. 'I know that you'll do what you want to do... And that you won't listen to me. But I can help you in other ways. Perhaps I can make you see how unworthy that man is of you.'

Trembling from oppression, Aoi took her leave.

Akira watched her shaking form climb up the stairs to her bedroom. He thought that she looked so incredibly fragile, and his blood boiled at the thought of Yusaku Fujiki taking advantage of her desire to be loved.

In that moment, Akira vowed that his sister would find love in someone who truly deserved her.

So that she could forget all about Yusaku Fujiki.

I'll never hand her over, Akira thought vengefully, *Not to you, Fujiki Yusaku.*

The next day, Yusaku walked to school in a daze.

He couldn't snap out of his sleep-deprived trance. Even when he reached the school gates and needed to feign composure, he couldn't stop thinking about last night's events. The smooth texture of Aoi's warm skin was burned to his fingertips. Her moans and confessions of affection were replaying in an

endless loop in his mind and he swore that his heart was still swelling from emotion.

And though he hated to admit it, Ai was right.

He loved Aoi. Aoi loved him back.

She single-handedly melted his icy soul.

He feels so vulnerable (and safe) with her.

And though he'll never explicitly say so, he didn't want to hand her over to anyone. Even so, he willed himself to push her away. But every time he did, she'd look at him with the most painful expression on her face. He never, ever wanted to put that look on her face. But the alternative was an eternity crying by his side, wishing he could be more than envoy of revenge.

How could he do that to her?

He couldn't. He should change for her.

But was he willing to do that? To suddenly open his eyes up to a future that previously never existed? Should he serious reconfigure his entire life philosophy for one woman?

'Hey, creep.' Ai piped up. 'Are you thinking about that babe again?'

'Be quiet.'

'You should apologize for being such a dick last night.'

Yusaku narrowed his eyes. He was aware of that.

'You don't have to be with her romantically to be human to her, you know.' Ai sighed. 'All she wants from you is a connection.'

Just then, Yusaku caught a glimpse of Aoi from his peripheral. She was walking towards the main buildings, which is where he was headed as well.

Should they walk together?

Just as classmates, of course.

'Hey...' he called out softly. Surprisingly, she heard him. She stiffened and looked back over her shoulder. Their eyes met. Yusaku thought he was about to pass out from anxiety. Every nerve in his body felt like it had been zapped to maximum sensitivity. 'Aoi.' he greeted, stopping by her side to show that he wanted to walk with her. 'Good morning.'

'Good morning.' she replied as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. They then descended into comfortable silence. She allowed herself to be lost in those vibrantly hypnotic emerald orbs of his. When Aoi realized that must have been staring into his eyes for far too long, she grudgingly tore her gaze away from him and asked, 'Yusaku... Why are you talking to me?'

Yusaku inhaled sharply. His heart was beating so fast against his chest that he thought it was going to implode at any second now. Why was talking to Aoi so difficult? 'I'm sorry for what happened yesterday.'

'O-Oh...' she was visibly discomforted by the reminder of last night's events. Yusaku noticed that her cheeks tinted the faintest shade of red as she bit her bottom lip nervously. She still couldn't look at him either. As terrible as it sounded, Yusaku thought anticipated that she would be more willing to talk to him today. The fact that she was less accommodating of him hammered it into his head that he really hurt her last night.

Had he hurt her? Oh, he did way more than that.

Aoi was fuming inside. Having gotten no sleep last evening, she had until sunrise to reflect on the situation between herself and Yusaku. After endless deliberation, she came to the conclusion that Yusaku might love her, but he sure as hell didn't care about her. At least, not enough to show it. He coldly pushed her away after he was sexually gratified and didn't offer to walk her home even though it was late at night. He didn't send her a text to ask if she was alright or if she even made it home. And now he was approaching her

at school acting like he could just casually ask for forgiveness? Was he insane?

The most infuriating part of all this?

She was still hopelessly in love with him. Although Emma and Akira's lectures should have deterred her feelings for Yusaku, the truth was that all they did was grow. Each passing second, she loved him more. No matter how much he hurt her, she couldn't find it in herself to detest him. All she felt for him was overwhelming empathy and desire.

Even though she should want to hit him, she was ecstatic that he was talking to her. But now, the silence had gone on for far too long and she decided that she better bid him farewell before the tension crushed them both.

But she didn't want to *leave* him.

'Did I satisfy you last night?' she asked without thinking.

Yusaku turned beet red. 'A-Ah... Yeah.'

'I wouldn't mind, you know.' Aoi finally met his eyes with her own. Her heart was beating thunderously against her chest. *Why am I doing this?* she thought, *I'm only going to get hurt again*. 'If we did that again.'

'I told you I'm not interested in you.' he sounded almost angry. His words stung, but Aoi was used to it at this point. There wasn't much he could do to make her feel more like utter crap.

'I know.' she whispered. 'I know you don't love me, but it's just as you said, right? Sex isn't love... So I'm not asking for you to be interested in me.'

I just want to have your attention, she thought pitifully and she knew she was being absolutely pathetic. Yet, the thought of Yusaku completely abandoning her and cutting her out of his life... It was enough to crush her. She wasn't ready for it. Even though they would never be a couple, at the

very least, she wanted his attention. At the very least, she wanted his eyes, hands, and warmth on her.

Emma told her that she should want better for herself.

What if she didn't? What if Yusaku's attention was exactly what she wanted?

'Why would you propose an arrangement like that?' Yusaku's question broke into her thoughts.

'It's a mutually beneficial agreement.' she shrugged. 'We both enjoy having sex with each other.'

'I'll never love you.' his tone was firm. 'If you think that an arrangement like this is going to sway me-'

'I already know that you'll never love me.' she interjected. 'That's why it's not your love I'm asking for, but your attention.'

Yusaku didn't know what to say.

'Think about it.' she continued when he said nothing. 'I'm going to class now.'

Yusaku didn't respond. He watched in awe as Aoi walked away, and wondered how it was that she kept coming back after being hurt by him.

Thanks everyone for the reviews! If you have an account, I replied to you on PM! Otherwise, thanks to the guest reviewers who read and review. Thanks for all the encouragement!

Yujo0147, happy belated Valentine's to you too! Also, thank you very much for the idea of Emma spying on Aoi as ordered by Akira. Initially, the interaction was meant to be written differently but your idea was so much more fitting. Thanks for that!

JustARandomGuy, your pregnancy suspicions will be addressed in later chapters! Thanks for reading my story.

Again, thanks everyone for reading and giving suggestions! I have vague ideas of where I want this all to go, but I'm totally lost with details. So all your suggestions are really helpful when I brainstorm what to write next.

7. The Cracks In His Skin

'How are you, Zaizen-san?'

'I'm fine.' Aoi replied politely. She was currently seated in the school counselor's office as part of the agreement not to taint her student record. Truthfully, she thought it was a ridiculous trade-off, but she complied as to not anger her brother. It felt weird being here; like she was implicitly being told that something was seriously wrong with her to have sex with someone she loved.

The therapist, an older woman with greying hair and calming, blue eyes smiled at her patient. She nodded slowly, as if processing Aoi's stupidly simple answer. Aoi felt weird around this person. It didn't feel like she was actually a therapist, but more like an actor playing one. 'And do you know why you're here?'

'Because of my inappropriate behaviour in one of the classrooms.'

'Right... Now, you might think we're judging you and punishing you, but the truth is that we just want to help.'

Aoi wanted to snap back, but resisted her rebellious spirit. 'I see.' she replied robotically. 'Thank you.'

'Now... Have you and Fujiki-san interacted since the incident?'

Aoi nodded.

'Ah... Zaizen-san, do you want to tell me more about your relationship with him?'

'I don't understand how that's any of your business.'

'Well, we're here to address your peculiar... *characteristics*.'

Aoi frowned. 'So now I'm not normal?'

'To be engaged in intercourse on school grounds... That is socially deviant behaviour, don't you agree, Zaizen-san? Don't you think it's worth investigating your psychological depths to see what prompts you to involve yourself in this type of behaviour?'

'No.' Aoi's tone was angry. 'To both of your questions. Just so you know...' the normally docile student was running out of patience. 'I was a virgin before then.'

The counsellor raised a quizzical brow. Now that was surprising. And perhaps untrue? How could a sexually inexperienced girl bring herself to do something as shameful as screw her classmate on campus? 'That... That's a surprising revelation.'

'Maybe it wouldn't be so surprising if you had just asked me what happened instead of jumping to conclusions.'

The older woman chuckled uncomfortably. 'Ha... Zaizen-san, no one is jumping to any sort of conclusions!'

'Then why am I here?' Aoi pressed. 'Why am I being forced to undergo third-rate therapy during class hours? Why are you guys treating me like I'm sick?'

'Zaizen-san, surely you understand that what you did is not exactly... Err, *normal*.'

If having sex is a sign of mental illness, half the school needs to be committed to an institution.'

'Zaizen-san-'

'The only difference in my case is that I got caught.' Aoi's tone was unnervingly sharp. 'And that I'm a woman. I bet the principal didn't call Yusaku into his office.'

'You know we can't disclose information about other students.'

'I'm not asking you to confirm or deny because I already know. You expect different things from me because of my gender, but my human desires shouldn't be taken against me.'

'Your actions don't just impact you.' the counsellor raised her brows. 'Realize that while you're in that school uniform, your actions reflect the values of our school. Think of your stepbrother as well; you're the younger sister of a powerful man at SOL Technologies. When you act, think of him. Think of us. Think of the people whose names you carry.'

'I shouldn't have to!' Aoi was visibly upset now. 'I'm my own person!'

The counsellor leaned back on her chair. She took a deep inhale through her nose and pursed her lips. She tapped her pen repeatedly on her clipboard; perhaps a nervous reaction to Aoi's defiance. However, the counsellor knew just as well as the rest of the staff did that there was no way they could actually penalize this student. She was Akira Zaizen's little sister - it would be a blow to the school's prestige if they lost that link to an important member of society.

'I think that's enough for today.' the counsellor grudgingly smiled. This was the only way to handle this situation. If Aoi wasn't going to cooperate, she might as well leave the session. At least she showed up so that the counsellor could report back to the principal that she was attending her required appointments. 'Thank you, Zaizen-san.'

Aoi picked up her bag in a hurry.

'I'll see you next week, Zaizen-san.'

'Yes, counsellor.' Aoi whispered as she made her way out.

The young girl was fuming inside. She was seeing red. Yet again, her agency was being wagged in front of her face by someone who wanted to control her but knew nothing about her. Aoi felt worse than invisible. She felt like she was a mistake. All she wanted was to be unapologetically free. Yet, she had none of that in her life. Akira wouldn't even allow her out of

the apartment after sundown, which meant that every single day, she had to go straight home after classes and do nothing but watch as the city lights illuminated a map of the city that she could never explore.

Except she broke that rule the other day, when she slept with Yusaku.

Yes, her brother was upset - but Aoi didn't regret what she did, not at all.

Sure, Emma lectured her - but Emma didn't understand that even though Yusaku broke her heart, that instance of being out of the apartment, freely loving someone in a room that she'd never been in before, walking back home when the sun was actually *down*; those were memories that Aoi cherished. Even if she was being a bad student or sister or person, she was still *free* that night.

She wanted to feel that again.

When Aoi walked past the school gates, she reached into her jacket pocket. She whipped out her cellphone and dialled a number that she unblocked a long time ago.

Yusaku had just made it home when his cellphone rang. The caller ID showed that it was Aoi Zaizen trying to contact him.

'I know you're not gonna answer that.' Ai teased. 'You chicken.'

Of course, Yusaku answered the call after that comment. He wasn't about to be made fun of by an AI. Thankfully, Ai knew its masters weaknesses well. Yusaku's biggest weakness was the desire to rise up to challenges. Ai knew that in order to get Yusaku to do anything, it had to threaten him with failure.

'Can I come over?' Aoi asked.

No.

'Sure.' he replied without thinking, knowing full well why she wanted to see him. The anticipation excited him. Against his better judgement, he made plans with her to see her shortly. Despite himself, he still felt an odd rush of happiness.

He loved spending time with Aoi. It was stressful, but it was fun. Whenever he was around her, negotiating how far their relationship could go, he was always thinking about her feelings. He didn't want her to become attached, but he also couldn't find it in him to give her up. He had feelings for her; that much was true. But he wasn't willing to act on them because he wasn't about to trap her into a fruitless life. He was going nowhere, he had no goals other than revenge, and he certainly wasn't a man of worth or prestige that she deserved.

He *sucked*.

She deserved better, but he wanted her.

Was there anything worse than liking someone you didn't deserve?

And yet, in preparation for Aoi's arrival, he ordered Roboppi to clean the room and he hopped into the shower to cleanse himself. He was by no means dirty, but he wanted to respect Aoi by thoroughly cleansing himself. For his own peace of mind, he couldn't touch her without doing all he could to purify himself. It almost felt sinful whenever they had sex; he felt like he was ruining her, but her eagerness to return his affection was also an expression of herself, of her sexuality, that he was more than happy to enjoy.

Before long, he found himself waiting by the door of his apartment building. It was awkward, but he didn't feel comfortable otherwise. Knowing that she was coming to see him, his room felt stuffy and cramped. After he got dressed, he paced back and forth around his bed uncontrollably. Why was she making him so nervous? So in the end, he settled for waiting by the building. At any rate, she couldn't get in by herself. He'd have to come down at some point anyway.

When he saw her approaching, he swallowed a hard lump at his throat.

He was internally screaming.

She looked so beautiful and he was so unworthy.

Why...

'Thank you for having me over.' Aoi said politely. It was unnerving how detached their conversations were. To Yusaku, it was strange that Aoi still spoke to him with her guard up. He didn't think that his constant rejection of her was a significant factor in that either. That's just how Aoi was; always setting herself a mile away from everyone around her.

It irritated him. It seemed as if to Aoi, the only way to truly connect with her was through affection. But Yusaku wanted something safer than that. After all, he could connect to Kusanagi (and to a lesser extent, Naoki) on a friendly basis. Yet that seemed to be completely impossible when it came to Aoi. Every conversation with her in public was like being poked under a nail with a needle. It was so dreadfully uncomfortable.

And, in a way, Aoi's interactive distance felt like rejection to Yusaku.

'We can go inside.' he eventually responded.

She nodded and they wasted no time in doing just that. Every step up the staircase felt like a gruelling century. Yusaku controlled his pace purposely, trying to give the impression that he wasn't at all eager to get to his room. Unfortunately, Aoi fell for his act. It took a hit on her confidence, but not enough to get her to tuck her tail between her legs and turn around.

One silent question hung unsaid in the air between them; How on earth was this so casual?

It felt robotic; dehumanizingly so. When they got to his room, Yusaku shut the door behind him and immediately met Aoi's lips for a kiss. And somehow, in that instance of physical contact, all the intense feelings that

were suspended from conversation suddenly washed over them: Aoi with her desire to be with him, and Yusaku with his internal of conflicting of wanting her versus not being good enough for her.

Those feelings, though they remained unsaid, translated into the way they touched each other. Aoi was passionate and slow, like she wanted to burn the texture of his skin to the back of her mind. On the other hand, Yusaku was erratic. He'd pull her in and then push her away in a split second, like he couldn't decide how he wanted to proceed or as if he was frightened of intimacy. In many ways, he was terrified of Aoi and what she could do to him and his goals.

Aoi discarded her jacket and kissed him with more fervour.

'Wait.' he managed against her lips, but didn't make an effort to stop what they were doing. 'Aoi, *wait*.'

'Ah, Yusa-'

'Let's talk.'

Intrigued that Yusaku actually wanted to have a conversation, she let go of him abruptly. She stared at him with wide-eyes that held slight hope, but that was lost on Yusaku. He looked back at her with the same detached, cold eyes - but maybe he was just a master of concealment.

'We should have rules.'

Aoi's heart fell.

Then, anger hit her, and it hit her *hard*. Why did she always have to be confronted by rules? It seemed as though in every aspect of her life, she was a slave to an authority above her. But this guy shouldn't have any power over her head. They were the same age, they went to the same school, and they had essentially nothing to do with each other outside of casual sex. Sure, Aoi had feelings for him... But that shouldn't be perceived as her handing him some sort of control over her!

'Why do we need to have rules?' she snapped. Her face flushed with the heat of frustration. Now this, Yusaku noticed. His brain whirred with a billion hypotheses on why Aoi was reacting with irritation.

'To protect ourselves.' he said calmly.

'From what?'

He shrugged. 'From anything.'

'Yusaku...' she frowned. 'You're not making any sense.'

'One...' Yusaku undid his tie. He wanted to have this conversation, but he also couldn't quell the excitement of being with Aoi again. 'We have to use protection.'

Aoi blushed beet-red. She knew that was going to come up sooner or later.

'Two...' he tossed his jacket to the floor and hastily unbuttoned his white shirt. 'This has to be a secret between us.'

Aoi winced. Well, her brother and Emma knew, but... That wasn't really her fault, so she supposed that didn't count.

'And three...' Yusaku cupped her face. 'Don't say the "L" word.'

Aoi's face fell.

'Don't say the word, "love."'

That stung.

Nevertheless, she nodded and pulled him in for a kiss. He reciprocated passionately; a sharp contrast to the words that had just tumbled out of his mouth.

Despite being rejected by him time and time again, it still felt right to be with him. Though she hated to admit it, maybe this was enough for her.

Even if he claimed not to love her back and that he didn't love her, the feeling of love she felt from him when they were together was enough to satiate her. She was confident that he felt her love as well. And if he was constantly accepting it, then he must like her back in some way, right? Aoi didn't know if she was secretly correct or if she was trying to make sense out of an impossible situation, but that's what she firmly believed.

So no matter how many times he said he didn't want her love, the fact that he kept accepting it told her otherwise.

Still, that didn't mean that he didn't cut her every time he spoke so cruelly.

Somehow, they ended up on the bed with him on top of her, trailing hot kisses down her neck. Aoi was still in a daze, but she attempted to feign passion. Her breathing was hard - not because she was excited, but because she was upset - but that difference was lost on Yusaku. She arched her back up to him, knowing that he liked it when she did that. His fingers fumbled with the buttons of her shirt but he managed to get them all in the end. He then faced her and leaned in for a kiss, but she stopped him. He shot her a confused expression. 'Aoi?'

'I don't want rules.' she whispered.

Yusaku didn't answer, but he continued staring at her. She had no idea what he was thinking.

'I mean, the first one is fine.' she admitted bashfully. 'But the rest... Especially the last one...'

'What about it?'

'I don't know.' she turned away because she felt tears prickle her eyes. She shut her eyelids and rolled over to her side. There was no way she could continue this conversation with him. It was hurting too much. 'Sorry about this.'

'Don't worry about it.' he said in that gentle tone of his again; the one he reserved for the moments she loved most. She hated how easily he could switch characters. Was there truly a soft side to him or was he just playing games with her mind? 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'Tell me.'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

It was true - she was beyond exhausted at this point. Even Yusaku could see that. The sensual excitement left her and now she was practically collapsed on his bed, the stress of recent events in her life finally weighing down on her. She had been dehumanized and objectified in so many ways, but it was the dehumanization from the person she liked that was crushing her.

'Aoi, *tell me*.'

'You want rules.' she stated with a shaky voice. 'Why?'

'It's irresponsible of us to continue doing this without any rules.'

'Human relationships are irresponsible.' she shot back, her eyes fluttering open. 'It's that unpredictability between two people that makes this a real relationship between human beings. I know we're not seeing each other, but we're both sentient, right?'

'That's why we need rules.' he insisted. 'To make sure that neither of us gets hurt.'

'It's alright to get hurt. As long as every moment we spend together is a true reflection of how we feel, good or bad, then it's fine. You think you don't hurt me? You hurt me so much.'

Yusaku's chest tightened. Her blatant exposure of her own feelings was unexpected. He didn't think that she would outwardly say that he was

hurting her. Actually, he didn't think he had hurt her to the point of exhaustion. To witness it in front of him was an experience he was unprepared for.

But what did she expect him to do? He had to get her away from him one way or the other. She wasn't going to listen to reason, so his only option was to push her away by constantly rejecting her. And yes, he anticipated that she would eventually tire of him - but now that she actually was, he was frightened. Was she about to leave him? Why was he fearful of that? Isn't that what he wanted in the first place? Then why was he freaking out? Why were there butterflies in his stomach? Not those nice ones either - the nasty, carnivorous type that were an omen of bad luck.

'If I hurt you, why don't you leave?' he hissed angrily. His defensive, hyper logical side was kicking in again. It was like a learned reaction to Aoi's prodding; the more she poked at him, the more she tried to get close to him, the harder he'd lash out at her. Like she kept stepping on a sore spot, a wound that hadn't closed yet.

'Why don't you push me away completely?' Aoi laid on her back to come face-to-face with Yusaku. 'Do you like me or something, Yusaku?'

His gaze burned into hers. The sincerity reflected in her warm, hazel eyes was warmed his icy soul. The sun was setting, and the orange hues of the sky seeping in from the windows danced in her chestnut orbs like embers hopping on lake water. Aoi Zaizen, he decided, was going to be the death of him. He connected with her in strange, convoluted ways that made him question his life motto of solitude.

I don't need warmth from people, he reminded himself, *I don't need friends. I don't have a future. I don't need warmth from people. I don't need warmth. I don't need Aoi.*

'Do you like me, Yusaku?'

Aoi didn't wait for him to answer. She sat up and motioned for him to lay down. He did as he was told, and she climbed on top of him, straddling his

hips. She discarded her blouse and unhooked her bra, causing her partner's eyes to dart to her chest. She blushed at that. Suddenly self-conscious, Aoi shifted and accidentally brushed against the growing erection in his pants. She squeaked and jumped slightly. Then, she cursed herself in her head. For some stupid reason, she was a hundred times more embarrassed to do this than she'd ever been. Perhaps it was because it was still daylight out, and she knew that the sunlight exposed every bit of her in unforgiving ways.

Yusaku thought otherwise. He didn't think that the time of day would make a difference, but he was totally wrong. With her completely exposed to him under blaring brightness, she had never looked more stunning. For the first time, he could clearly see the immaculate nature of her skin, the feminine dips and curves of her body with just her skirt concealing where they would connect later; he couldn't be more aroused.

'Can I touch you?'

'Don't ask, you idiot! Just do it!' she scolded, her blush deepening. 'It's so embarrassing!'

Yusaku tilted his head and shot her a confused expression. He looked almost offended. 'I just want to make sure that you're comfortable with me.'

'I am.' she insisted.

'So then... Can I touch you?'

She was appalled by his persistence in asking her permission, but she gave him a firm 'Yes' in the end.

With that, he reached one arm out to hook her by the waist and pull her closer. She landed with her palms on either side of his head, but he pulled her downwards so that she supported herself on her elbows. He took one nipple into his mouth, the other being fondled by his free hand. Aoi cried out in pleasure. He was being so attentive and caring that the whole ordeal was mentally stimulating her in addition to the physical, sensual affection he was giving.

Maybe it was a dream manufactured by her wishful thinking, but she thought that maybe him asking her permission to touch her was a sign that he genuinely cared about her. He was essentially handing her control. That couldn't be easy for anybody. At least, it didn't seem that way to the people in her life who always sought to control her.

'Ah...' Aoi whimpered. Her fingers tangled in his hair, tugging whenever he sucked or nipped in a way that made her squirm. Her breathing was laboured her body was trembling. Satisfied with her reaction, Yusaku's hand left her breast to travel around to her backside. His mouth moved from her chest to her neck, where he inhaled that sweetly floral fragrance she always wore.

'You always smell so good.' he said in a soft, husky voice like he was uttering a secret. His grip on her ass was tightening. 'You're driving me insane.'

His words were exciting her. She was now moaning and squirming for absolutely no reason. Her teeth clenched in frustration. It was ridiculous how turned on she was getting just by listening to him. She wanted to have the same effect on him, not realizing that she already did.

Aoi wriggled free of his grasp and sat up on him. He sighed from the pressure. She unbuckled his belt and undid his pants, trying not to look at him in the eye. For some reason, she was incredibly nervous. Not to say that she didn't want this; it was the opposite. She hadn't wanted him with this intensity before.

When she held him in her hand, he propped himself up on his elbows and began a slow slide into a sitting position. Confused, Aoi looked at him with an almost fearful expression. She thought he was rejecting her. It broke his heart.

'Come here.' he whispered, pulling her gently by the arms. She obeyed and climbed on top of him yet again, though he was sitting and she was on her knees. In this position, she was taller than him by a full head. Being bare

and in such close proximity to him, she was self-conscious about her body - but he loved it and he was determined to show her that.

He remembered that she liked being told that she was attractive.

'My beautiful baby.' he murmured and she decided then and there that she could get used to this nickname. He reached over to his bedside drawer and retrieved a condom, though his eyes never left hers. His gaze was smouldering and she felt weak under the mercy of vibrant emeralds. Her mouth felt dry the whole time he was donning the protection; they were really going to do it - they were seriously going to have sex again and she was once more going to experience the most intense array of emotions all at once. When he was done, he placed a hand on her waist to guide her, the other on himself so that he could position them properly. She adjusted her panties to the side and felt his tip prodding her entrance.

'O-Oh...' she moaned. The contact was making her light-headed. Would it feel this way with any other man?

'Do you feel good, baby?'

'Ah... Yusaku...'

Yusaku was struggling not to burst then and there. The whole situation was too much for him to handle; Aoi moaning and whimpering while he was teasing her with her sizeable breasts in front of his face. He's never been more aroused in his life.

'Can I put it all in?' he asked softly.

'Yes! Just do it.' she hissed. Her arms wrapped around his neck, where she hung her head. He blushed madly as her breasts hovered right in front of him, closer now.

I like them too much, he thought to himself with some humiliation, *Is it stupid to compliment her on them?*

'You have a nice body.' he blurted stupidly.

'Thank you.' she breathed and lowered herself on him. 'Ah, ah, *uh*...' she groaned with every inch she took inside of her. Yusaku's eyes rolled to the back of his head and he held onto her hips. He loved how hot and wet she was for him. He clenched his teeth when he met her end and he felt her tighten around him. His eyes snapped open and darted to her face. She looked half in-pain and half in-pleasure. She was biting her lip and her brows were scrunched together.

'Aoi...' he kissed below her collarbone. 'Does it hurt?'

'*Yes*.' she whined. 'It hurts so good.'

He couldn't believe that this timid girl was actually saying such provocative things. But more so than that, he was worried that she confirmed that she was in pain. He didn't want her to feel that way. 'We can stop.'

'No.' she smiled down at him. 'I'm just getting used to it. I want to do this with you.'

'I'm happy that you trust me.'

'Really?' her smile widened and her eyes brightened. 'You feel happy about that?'

Realizing his error, but also recognizing that it was too late, his jaw dropped. He let his guard down for a split second and she caught onto it so quickly. 'U-Um-'

'No.' she pecked him on the lips to silence him. 'Don't ruin it.'

She started a slow pace up and down. She moaned with every movement he made, and he matched her with low growls. Aoi threw her head back and looked up at the ceiling, feeling once more that sweet liberation that came with doing *exactly* what she wanted; a luxury that she couldn't really afford, not while being watched by so many people who wanted to control her.

Yusaku didn't want to do any of that. He only wanted to enjoy her. With him, Aoi didn't feel like she had to work for his attention, but rather that he actually demanded it. Even if he didn't love her, the affection that he gave her was pure and accessible.

She was riding that high and she knew she wouldn't last long. It was too much for her; the warmth of his skin, the unrhythmic grunts and groans that tore from his throat, and the surprising vibrancy of his eyes whenever she looked at him - there was no way she could keep herself from coming apart.

'Yes, yes, *yes*!' she screamed, burying him painfully deep inside of her and reaching her climax. She trembled as waves of pleasure ripped through her. Her pace slowed and she moaned uncontrollably.

Yusaku didn't want her pleasure to end there. Besides, he thought that was incredibly stunning when she orgasmed; he wanted to see that again and again. In one swift movement, he pushed his weight over her so that she landed on her back. Now on top of her, he rode her hard and kissed her wetly on the mouth. Aoi's hands ran sloppily up and down his torso. The texture of his toned muscles flexing and rippling with every movement he made excited her. She reached around to rake her nails down his back, causing him cry out. Still, she didn't stop. She dug her nails into his skin and he took his revenge by thrusting in and out of her with brutal passion.

She enjoyed another release, and he followed soon after. He buried his moans into her lips with yet another deep, loving kiss.

'I'm sorry.' Akira sighed. 'She's usually here by now.'

'That's fine.' another man, about the same age as Akira, smiled from the other end of the table. 'I'm excited to meet her.'

'Good.' SOL's chief laughed politely. 'I hope that we have an understand, by the way.'

'I would never hurt your sister. You know, I want to settle down soon. I don't want to fool around. It's me who's worried that with her being so young, she would want to live out her youth and not get into a serious relationship.'

'The only relationship Aoi should ever have is a serious one.' Akira snapped. 'I hope that when she meets you, she'll realize that a man as established as you is exactly who she needs.'

Hey guys! Thank you so much for reading. I hope to hear what you guys feel about this chapter and as usual, any suggestions are always welcome. I'm coming to a point in this story where I have a few things planned out though, so the next few chapters are generally set in stone. But I guess I never know!

If you have an account, I have replied to you through private messaging. Otherwise, I'll reply to you in this note!

Yujo0147, you were right! Akira is trying to pair Aoi up with someone who he thinks is better than Yusaku. Thank you for all the support you give me.

OWO, that's a really cool idea about Akira and Emma! I'm seriously considering it. If I ever use it, I will mention you! Thanks so much for reading and reviewing!

Ghostkid33, thanks a lot for returning and reviewing! Both Aoi and Yusaku will definitely do some emotional maturing, and the lows are part of them growing up. Your guess was right and it will be played out next chapter!

Thanks to all the guest reviewers who commented and are supportive. Your positive thoughts are really encouraging.

8. Burst

I need to work out, Yusaku thought miserably as he lay limp on his mattress. Aoi was wrapped in his arms with the side of her face pressed up against his chest. He knew for certain that she was able to listen to the rabbit-quick thumping of his heartbeat. Strangely, Aoi found that rhythm comforting. Her eyelids were closing and she her body hummed pleasantly, lulling her to a drowsy state of mind.

She looks satisfied, he thought proudly. Even if he was exhausted in the end, he was content that he was able to please her. He was always worried whether or not she enjoyed their intimacy as much as he did. It was a concern that was always at the back of his head every time they did this.

Yusaku was aware that he'd have to get her to leave pretty soon. It was better for her to get home before it got dark. Akira didn't seem like the type to appreciate her coming home late, nor was it safe for Aoi to walk the streets without sunlight guiding her way. She couldn't stay with Yusaku, no matter how much both of them secretly wanted that.

Today, the aftermath was comfortable.

But it couldn't last forever.

'You can take a shower before you go.' Yusaku broke the tense silence in the air. 'I'll take one after you.'

Aoi's eyes snapped open, but she said nothing. Why did he have to go and ruin a good thing? Even though it was quiet, they were enjoying each other's presence. At least, *she* was. Why couldn't he be merciful and let the passion of their lovemaking linger for just a while longer? So Aoi pretended to not hear him, hoping that he'd have it in his heart to let her stay for just another minute.

But Yusaku spoke again. 'I'd like to take one soon.'

Aoi's eyes stung with the threat of tears. Why did Yusaku have to be such an asshole?

Defeated, Aoi whispered a broken 'O-OK...' and sat up. Without facing him, she got off the bed and headed to his bathroom. Shortly after, he heard the light sound of water hitting the shower tiles. Yusaku stared up at his run-down ceiling which had paint beginning to peel off of it.

Am I being too cruel? he asked himself, *Should I just end this now?*

But the idea of never doing this with Aoi again was too painful.

He sighed and rubbed his temples. *Fuck.* Why was this so complicated? This is precisely why he hated having to negotiate relationships in his life. He got up and dressed himself in only his trousers. When he turned around to look for his shirt and jacket, Aoi stepped out of the bathroom fully dressed. Their eyes met for only a split second before she looked away shamefully. Yusaku was confused. Why did she look embarrassed?

She wasn't embarrassed - she was hurt. It was painful to look at him. She could clearly see on his naked torso where she had sucked too hard. The marks on his body mapped the affection she gave him and it was incredibly hurtful that it seemed like none of that meant anything to him.

'Thanks for letting me use your shower.' Aoi said in that robotic, sickeningly polite voice of hers. It pissed Yusaku off, but he didn't say anything about it. Who was he to demand for her to be more familiar with him when he kept enforcing distance between them?

'Sure.' he replied with his usual nonchalance.

Aoi nodded. Then, she turned on her heel and walked out of his room.

Yusaku stared after her for a while. It was so strange how she could be next to him one second and just gone the next. His room was small, but now without her, it felt unnecessarily large and empty.

Suddenly, he felt a burst of emotion. He quickly located the rest of his clothes and hastily put them on. 'Aoi!' he called out, running out of his room and practically flying down the steps going downstairs. When he opened the door leading out of the building, he was surprised to see Aoi still standing by the doorway, her back to him, staring at an older woman on a motorcycle.

'Looks like your friend is here.' the woman giggled.

'What?' Aoi breathed and looked over her shoulder to see Yusaku. Her eyes widened, evidently surprised that he had followed her out. 'What are you doing here?'

'I-I...' *Shit!* 'I was going to offer to walk you home.'

'That won't be necessary.' Emma Bessho, the woman in question, smiled as she took off her helmet. 'Aoi-san is coming home with me.' she motioned for the younger girl to hop on the bike. 'Come, now, Aoi-san. I'll get you home before your brother loses his head.'

Aoi nodded. She then walked down the steps to meet her pseudo chauffeur.

'Text me when you get home.' Yusaku called after her before he returned to the confines of his building. That uncharacteristic display of concern left Aoi fuming inside. What the hell? Just a few minutes ago, he basically kicked her out of his apartment. Now he was acting like her leaving was the first thing in the world. What kind of sick game was he playing? Aoi decided that she was tired of it.

Once Aoi was close enough, Emma tossed her a spare helmet. 'So that's him, huh?'

'That's him.' Aoi answered flatly.

'Hmm... You guys look good together!'

'We aren't together like that.'

'Oh? Why not?'

'Because he doesn't like me.' Aoi said firmly and that was that; Emma knew better than to pry into another woman's broken heart. Although Aoi tried to say that Yusaku wasn't interested in her in an off-handed way, her eyes always gave her away. She was never good at hiding her emotions.

'Well...' Emma attempted a chipper tone. 'It seemed like he likes you a lot, just now.'

'He's just a good actor. It's part of his game.'

Without another word, Aoi took her seat behind Emma, who then drove off to the Zaizen's household. To the younger girl, the ride was actually quite nice. With the wind blowing against her and the setting sun chilling her body to almost paralyzing temperatures, Aoi allowed her mind to disconnect from her body for a while. For a few minutes, she didn't think about anybody - she had no obligations and was answerable to no one.

She savoured that sense of liberation, for she knew that she was going to be caged in by Akira once she got home.

'Here we are.' Emma declared as she parked her motorcycle in front of the luxurious condominium building. Aoi hopped off and handed Emma the spare helmet. 'By the way...' Emma's eyes gleamed with childish mischief. 'Don't mention to Akira that I gave you a ride home.'

'Why *did* you give me a ride home?' Aoi questioned. 'And how did you know where to find me?'

'Hey, when I was your age, I had intense relationships too... I know what it's like to be young. You're not gonna listen to any adults. So, at the very least, I can take you home faster so that Akira doesn't worry too much.'

Aoi's eyes narrowed. 'Why would you do this for me?'

'Not for you.' Emma smiled warmly. 'For Akira.'

'I knew it.' the student scoffed. 'Thanks for this tonight, but from now on, don't interfere.'

Emma sighed. 'You're really stubborn, aren't you, Aoi-san?'

Aoi didn't answer. She marched into the lobby with a newfound frustration, her ears burning so hot her head could have melted right off. When she got into the elevator, she let out a throaty growl. What the hell! Now even Emma was trying to monitor her. Even though taking her home was a nice gesture, it was an act of kindness laced with the need to control.

Aoi was done being controlled.

What the people around her didn't realize was that the more they tried to reel her in to a path of perceived righteousness, the more she was going to rebel. At the rate she was going, it was not an exaggeration to hypothesize that she was well on her way to self-destruction. If harming herself was the only way to escape the prisoner bars around her, she was going to do it. Which is why even though so many people disapproved of her relationship with Yusaku, she was hellbent on pursuing it - because even if it was a stupid decision, it was *her* decision and that was the only comforting semblance of control she had over her life.

The elevator dinged and its doors parted. Aoi stepped into the spacious unit her stepbrother bought for them and was immediately greeted by the housemaid robot.

'Good evening, Aoi-chan.' the robot said.

Aoi ignored it and walked to the living room. She could hear her brother talking to someone, but she didn't recognize the second voice. Her stomach dropped. Did he call the police to look for her? Maybe one of her teachers? But when she made it into the room, she was surprised to see Akira talking to another man in a suit, who was seated opposite him from the coffee table.

'Ah! Aoi!' Akira beamed tensely. Aoi knew that he was livid, but he was hiding it because of the presence of the stranger. 'You're home in time for

dinner.'

'Good evening, Onii-sama.' Aoi replied softly. Her eyes were glued to the tall man beside her sibling. He had a healthy head of red hair and a pair of striking green eyes. 'Good evening to you as well.' she added politely. Akira would be furious if she didn't practice good manners.

Akira proceeded to introduce her to the man, who was apparently his superior at SOL Technologies. His name was given, but Aoi couldn't for the life of her remember what it was. Her brain was buzzing unpleasantly. She knew exactly what was going on. Her brother was trying to set her up with an older man, who she knew absolutely nothing about.

Was this Akira's way of punishing her? Because: message received. This was one of the most disgusting experiences of her life and it took all her willpower not to scream and storm out of the room.

Throughout the entire dinner, which of course featured the strange man as a guest, Aoi hid her shaking hands underneath the table. She tried desperately to feign interest as her brother and his colleague prattled on with small talk about work. Occasionally, they'd reel Aoi into the conversation by asking her about school or what her career aspirations were. Whenever this would happen, she could feel the unfamiliar man's gaze slide over her with impure intentions.

Worse still, Akira would observe his colleague doing this and nod to himself as if in approval.

It made Aoi sick to her stomach.

'Tell me, Aoi-chan...' the man began. 'Do you have a boyfriend?'

Aoi stiffened. She looked at her stepbrother, who shot her a murderous look. 'No.' she replied honestly. 'I don't.'

'She needs to focus on her studies.' Akira explained. 'She's a very serious girl.'

'That's good.' the man smiled. 'Although I do hope you have some time reserved for leisure.'

Aoi frowned. 'What did you have in mind?'

'I would just like to take you out for coffee after school sometime. If that's alright, Akira?'

'Of course it is.'

At that, Aoi's frustration increased tenfold. Her hands were now balling into fists under the table. Her fingers were clenched so tightly together that her nails dug into her palms. Did her brother seriously just answer *for* her?

Soon after, the dinner ended and the Zaizen siblings were walking the man to the door.

'Thank you for having me, Akira. It was a wonderful evening.'

'I'm satisfied that you enjoyed yourself.' Akira smiled tensely.

'And you.' the man looked at Aoi, who was at this point, mad with rage inside. 'It was lovely meeting you.' he leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Then, he whispered into her ear, 'Your brother was right... I am very interested in you.'

Aoi's eyes widened and she felt her entire body turn as numb as stone.

The man almost immediately afterwards. Akira walked him all the way to the elevator, but Aoi was glued in her place. Her feet felt like lead. She felt like she was burning inside. She felt, for the first time, nearly uncontrollable fury at her stepbrother, who she loved more than anything.

How could he put her in this situation?

When Akira came back, his tone was stern and he acted as if nothing was wrong. 'He's a nice man.' he justified. 'He'll be good to you. That...' he pointed at the shut door, indicating that he was talking about the person who

just left. '... Is the type of man that you deserve. Not some irresponsible, unpredictable...'

And Akira just went on and on. He was pacing in front of her, talking to himself about how Aoi just needed to open her eyes and realize that he knew what was best for her. That he understood the irrational desire to be with someone she felt attracted to, but that attraction was going to be her undoing.

He was speaking as if her sexuality in itself would be her undoing.

She wondered if he would say the same thing to her if she were born a boy.

'Are you *fucking kidding* me?' Aoi demanded out of nowhere, cutting Akira off. Unshed tears of anger and irritation were gleaming in her eyes. 'Onii-sama.' her eyes met his for what seemed like the first time that evening. 'How could you do this to me?'

'Do *not* talk to me like that, Aoi.'

'How can I not? How, when you're trying to control everything about me?' she spoke through clenched teeth. Despite her best efforts, her scalding tears fell. She could no longer contain the emotions that she had been hiding all evening.

'I'm not trying to control you. I'm trying to help you!'

'No-'

'You were about to make the mistake of being seriously involved with a classmate who doesn't give a damn about you.' Akira's voice rose slightly. 'Instead of penalizing you, I'm trying my best to understand where you're coming from. I know you're lonely, but I'm trying to show you that you don't have to settle for someone who is undeserving of you.'

'It's not about what I deserve. It's about what I want.'

'Forget about what you want! You're too young and naive to know what you *need*.'

'And *you* do?' Aoi scoffed, shaking her head. 'You can tell me what time to eat and go to bed, but you can't decide what I do with my own body!'

'Aoi, you're taking this too far! I'm not setting you up to do that!' Akira was furious now as well. He was disgusted by the idea of Aoi seriously considering that he would want her to be sexually engaged with that man. That... That part was none of his business. Akira just wanted her to get to know his colleague and spend time with him so that she could forget about Yusaku. Anything beyond that was entirely up to Aoi.

'Didn't you see the way he looked at me? Like he wanted to *eat* me?' Aoi's voice was breaking. 'And that's all *your* doing! You told him beforehand that you wanted him and I to get to know each other romantically! You commodified me! You sold me out!'

'I'm trying to help you!'

'No, you're not!' Aoi laughed bitterly. 'What are you going to do next, then, if this doesn't work? Are you going to ground me? Are you going to lock me in my room again? You can't stop me from leaving this home forever! Eventually, I'm going to leave and eventually, you'll lose all control you have over me!'

'And what will you do then, Aoi?' Akira moved in, closing the distance between them. He was practically towering over her now. 'Are you going to see that boy again?'

'It's none of your business what I do outside of your house!'

'Oh, but it *is*.' he hissed. 'You live by the grace of me. So you *will* do as I say, whether or not you understand that all I ask, I ask for the benefit of your happiness.'

'Why can't you see that you're making me unhappy by withholding my freedom?'

'That's not what I'm doing. Maybe in the future, you'll understand why I don't want you to see that boy.'

'Whether or not you want me to see him, I'm still going to do what I want.'

Akira's brows knit together. 'What did you say?'

Aoi kept quiet, but refused to retract her hard gaze away from her brother's.

'Aoi.' his tone turned firm. 'Are you still seeing Fujiki Yusaku?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because it's what I want to do.'

'I *fucking swear*.' Akira growled. 'You better not be sleeping with him again.'

'So what if I am?' Aoi stepped even closer to her brother, so that the tension between them was palpable. 'He gives me what I want, and he gives it to me *good*.'

Aoi's head snapped to the side. Akira had slapped her. *Hard.*

Aoi's cheek stung. Instinctively, she raised a hand to where she had been hit. The flesh was warm and tender. She could still feel a tingling, burning sensation.

She couldn't even cry. She was too shocked. Even her breathing had halted. She couldn't believe that her brother actually hit her.

'You ungrateful child.' he whispered sadly. Tears were pooling at the rims of his eyes. They escaped him. 'I gave up my entire life for you. And for what?

For you to throw all that way so that you can be that man's toy? I didn't work so hard for so long for you to turn out this way!'

'Yes, Onii-sama.' Aoi softly responded. She was having trouble regaining her breath. Every inhale felt like swallowing a handful of sharp ice that cut her lungs from the inside out.

'Do what you want, Aoi. I can't control you anymore. You're impossible. I just hope that one day, you'll have some sense knocked into that stupid, teenage brain of yours!'

He stormed off to his bedroom after that.

Aoi was left to herself in the lower level of the unit, where she stood in shock for what seemed like decades. The robot came up to her asking if she was alright, but she didn't give it any attention. She couldn't believe what was happening. This was a nightmare come true. She didn't know what to do. Why had her brother hit her? Did she push him to do that? Of course she did. If she just kept her legs closed and her mouth shut, Akira would still love her.

But her stepbrother's love was conditional. She didn't want that kind of love. She questioned its purity, and realized a long time ago that it no longer made her happy anyway.

With a newfound determination to escape, she ran out of the unit before her brother had the opportunity to program the robot to prevent her from leaving. She frantically pressed the elevator button, knowing that it wouldn't be long before Akira realized that she left. He must have heard the door shut behind her.

The elevator dinged open and she hopped inside. Its descent felt like a century. She was shifting her weight between her feet, trying to quell some of the anxiety she had. Then the doors finally parted, she ran out of the lobby and didn't stop until she was back in front of the steps of Yusaku's residence building. She rang his cellphone and was surprised (and relieved) that he picked up quickly.

'Hey.' his voice greeted. 'Are you home yet?'

At the familiar sound, Aoi choked. She felt weak and her tears were threatening to come back with a vengeance. She leaned against the concrete wall to steady herself. She felt like her knees might give out soon.

'Aoi?'

'I'm downstairs.' she managed, though her pain was evident in her tone. 'I can't go home.'

Yusaku fell silent.

'Please.' Aoi begged. 'I don't know where to go. But I can't... I can't go back there.'

Yusaku still refused to speak.

'Yusaku!' Aoi raised her voice. 'Please don't reject me right now. Please. I need you, so please-'

Just then, the door to the building opened. Yusaku stepped out with his cellphone still pressed up to his ear. His expression gave away no emotion, but she was just glad that he actually listened to her. She hung up the phone after seeing him, and he did the same. He didn't say anything, but made his way to her and wrapped her in a tight embrace.

She cried into his chest.

'What happened?'

'I... I don't want to t-talk about it.' she mumbled between sharp breaths. 'It's not like you c-care. Nobody cares. I-I'm worthless, I...' she sobbed in silence after that and Yusaku felt his heart twist in painful ways. He unhooked one arm from around her to cup her face, tilted her visage so that she had to look at him. 'Don't.' she warned. 'I'm repulsive when I cry.'

Yusaku shook his head. 'You always look nice.'

'You're lying.'

'I'm not.' he swore, and leaned in to kiss her deeply. Aoi reciprocated, kissing him back with passion. For some inexplicable reason, the attention he was giving her soothed the wounds in her heart.

I should march up there, Akira thought to himself as he watched the pair from his car. He was parked in a dark corner, and the dim lighting of this part of town guaranteed that he could not be seen from a distance.

When Akira realized that Aoi was gone, he immediately ran out of the apartment and ordered the receptionist to lend him one of the cars usually reserved for chauffeur services. Given that Aoi was traveling by foot and him by vehicle, it didn't take long before he caught up to her. It was a miracle that he even spotted her, not knowing where she was headed off to, so he didn't take that blessing lightly. No matter how much he wanted to scream at her to get into the car, he knew that he had to play his cards right.

So he followed her.

He should have known that she would come here.

I should give him a piece of my mind right here and now, Akira pondered. But the look on Aoi's face, and the surprising gentleness by which Yusaku was touching her made Akira doubt whether he should interrupt them or not. He watched the couple kiss, and observed that Yusaku whispered something into Aoi's ear before she nodded and they both disappeared into the building.

Akira's eyes were heavy. He decided to close them and take a long break to think about what he was going to do.

Hey guys, thank you so much for reading! I know some of you were wondering who the mysterious guy was, but I gave him no identity because I felt like it was less important than how his presence impacted the relationship between Aoi and Akira. Given VRAINS' small cast, it

was also difficult for me to pick a character that felt appropriate for the role. I hope this didn't disappoint, but I completely understand if it did! Sorry about that.

Yujo0147, now Akira finally finds out! Aoi is just tired of being controlled, and it hurts her more that Akira can't accept that she wants her freedom.

Envoy of Torrask, Aoi will definitely grow from the experience though!

OWO, Akira's canon age is 26! I was thinking of using Revolver, but I didn't feel like it would make much sense.

JustARandomGuy, thank you so much for your kind review! The impact of Akira's choice to do that is explored in this chapter!

Thanks so much for reading guys, and I hope to read what you all thought of this chapter!

9. Trickling Guilt

When Yusaku saw Aoi in distress, he felt pangs of pain throughout his body. It only worsened when she all but collapsed on his chest, crying for a reason unknown to him. He felt oddly powerless and useless. He didn't know why she was so upset and he certainly didn't know how to comfort her. So he did the only thing he knew how to do; he kissed her deeply, so that he could show her what he couldn't say in words.

Aoi kissed him back, but her participation lacked sensuality. Her kiss was desperate, pleading. She was pushing him against him in a way that didn't make him feel like she wanted his clothes off, but was as if she wanted to physically melt with him to quell an unspoken loneliness in her heart.

I wish I could melt with you, Yusaku thought selfishly.

'It's cold out here.' he whispered into her ear after breaking the kiss. 'I don't want you getting sick. Come inside.'

Aoi nodded. Yusaku led the way into the building and pair climbed the stairs to his apartment. When they entered his room, he reached for her hand. Surprised but not displeased by the contact, Aoi permitted him to do so. His fingers intertwined with hers and he walked her down the stairs that led to his open bedroom. As much as she didn't want to admit it, Aoi enjoyed the feeling of his warm skin. His presence always comforted her.

'You can have the bed.' Yusaku declared flatly.

'We can share it.'

He blushed at that proposal. Thankfully, he was never the type to turn red in the face, but he could feel the heat. His visage was so hot, he could feel it in his ears. As if he could survive a night laying on the same bed as Aoi! They could barely spend two hours together without getting into some kind of stupid, hormonal mess.

'Yusaku?'

'N-No.' he stammered. 'I'll sleep by the desk. It'll be like taking a nap.'

'I don't want that.' she insisted, squeezing his hand gently. 'I want to be beside you.'

Damn it!

Yusaku was freaking out inside, but he wasn't about to let her know that.

'We can talk about that later.' he dodged. 'Make yourself comfortable.'

Aoi was disappointed that he didn't like the idea of them laying side by side, but she was just grateful that he hadn't kicked her out yet. 'Can I lay down?' she asked and he nodded. Relieved, she climbed on the bed and practically collapsed on the soft mattress. Her body felt so heavy. The emotional burden she was carrying was exhausting.

Yusaku thought that she looked much more peaceful on his bed. Her eyes shut and her limbs seemed to relax. He didn't want to bother her, but he had to ask, 'What happened?'

Aoi stiffened.

Onii-sama tried to convince me to date his colleague? That was too much to say. Aoi didn't feel comfortable revealing that much. Even so, she supposed that perhaps Yusaku had a right to know. After all, he was technically her partner in intimacy. She was bound to him somehow, and-

Her eyes fluttered open.

What was she thinking? She wasn't tied to Yusaku at all. She even said so herself; that she didn't want his love and only desired his attention. Plus, Yusaku couldn't make it clearer to her that he wanted nothing to do with her outside of the bedroom.

He couldn't give less of a fuck if she was screwing someone else. Let alone if she was having problems at home. They weren't friends or lovers or

anything other than two individuals satisfying their physical needs.

Aoi's heart dropped. Now she felt even more dehumanized by the person she loved. She wasn't even a woman to him; just a toy.

Was Akira right?

But then why was Yusaku asking about what happened? Aoi wondered for a second if he actually cared about her, but chalked it down to just him being polite. She did call him in hysterics; it would be odd for him not to ask what caused her to be so upset.

'Um...' Aoi murmured, slowly sliding up into a sitting position. 'Onii-sama and I fought.'

'I see. So you ran away?'

'Something like that.'

'He won't be happy that you're here.' Yusaku crossed his arms. 'Staying here is just going to cause more problems between you guys.'

Aoi laughed bitterly. 'We have enough problems. Another one won't do much more damage.'

'Is that so?'

'My Onii-sama knows.' she said bluntly. 'He knows that I'm sleeping around with you.'

Yusaku's jaw dropped.

'He's known from the beginning.' Aoi continued. 'I was called into the principal's office because the staff saw you and I having sex from the classroom camera's recording.'

'Are you serious?' Yusaku's fought his shock and climbed on top of the bed to join Aoi. He sat across from her at a comfortable distance. 'Are you

alright?'

Aoi's heart swelled with emotion.

Since the whole incident with the recording's discovery, no one had bothered to ask her how she was feeling. For the one person to do so to be Yusaku, who supposedly didn't give a shit about her, was surprising.

But she was also happy. Because someone cared about her feelings enough to ask about them, and because the person who did so was someone whose affection she desperately wanted.

Then again, Yusaku was good at playing these games. He'd reel her in and chew her out after he was done screwing around with her, but she didn't mind that possibility for the time being. She wanted to maintain the fantasy that she and Yusaku were genuinely connecting. And even if they weren't, she was happy just pretending. Besides, the happiness she felt in her heart was real even if Yusaku's concern may not be.

'Aoi.' he repeated. 'Are you alright?'

'Does that matter to you?' she asked softly. Her eyes met his. She stared at him with hope, but he refused to let his guard down. His expression was unreadable.

'Right now it does.'

'Why...'

'Because you're staying at my place.' he said flatly. 'I have to determine how much care you need.'

Aoi let out a long sigh and fell back on the mattress. She rubbed her face with her hands and fought the urge to scream. She should have known. As if Yusaku could actually, *seriously* care about her. The only time his caregiving was convincing was when they were fucking and at this point, Aoi was sure that it was just because he was getting his rocks off.

'*Thanks*, Yusaku.' she muttered with clear irritation. 'I appreciate your concern.'

He frowned. Was that sarcasm in her tone? 'Did I do something wrong?'

'No!' she scoffed. 'Not at all. It's just...' she swallowed a hard lump in her throat. 'You are who you are. I shouldn't expect you to be otherwise.'

Her words struck a nasty chord in her companion. Yusaku's frown deepened and if she dared to look at him now, she would have seen that he was bothered. 'What are you trying to say?'

'Nothing.' she propped herself up on her elbows and met his gaze with her own.

'Explain.' he insisted. 'What did you mean by that?'

'Can we please just drop it?'

'Why can't you answer my question?'

'Please.' Aoi sighed. 'I don't have the energy to fight with you too.'

Yusaku forced himself to calm down. He knew that she was tired. He decided that he shouldn't be adding onto her stress. 'You're right. I'm sorry.'

'No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have provoked you.'

'Considering everything that's going on with you, you get a free pass.'

She flashed him a small smile.

'Anyway...' Yusaku began. 'Are you going to be alright by yourself here?'

Aoi's smile fell. 'What? You're leaving?'

'I actually had plans to meet Kusanagi-san to do some work. I was on my way down when you called.'

'Oh...' she was disappointed, but tried not to show it. Although she wanted him to stay, she didn't want to be selfish. Yusaku had his own life too. He had his priorities. It was beyond kind that he was already letting her stay over. She decided that it would be ludicrous for her to ask more of him, especially considering that he wasn't her boyfriend - he had no obligation to care for her. 'Well, have a nice evening!' she forced a chipper tone. 'Do you want me to make some tea for you to drink when you get home?'

'I have nothing to make tea with.' he deadpanned.

It was taking all of Aoi's willpower not to drop her tense smile. 'I see. Well... I can clean up-'

'I have Roboppi for that.'

'Ok, well, if you think of anything I can do for you-'

'That won't be necessary.' he waved his hand dismissively and got up. He then reached for his Duel Disk in its glass compartment and started on his way out. 'I hope you feel better, Aoi.'

And then the door slammed shut behind him.

He was gone.

Aoi rolled into a ball on the bed. She was slightly disheartened at Yusaku's callousness but desperately reminded herself that this was just who he was and it was wrong of her to ask him to change for her. After all, it's not like they were an item. He had no duty to offer her comfort. Even so, she was grateful that she had a room to go to that wasn't her own. She loved her bedroom back home, but she didn't think that she could relax in there tonight. A hand came up to touch her cheek, where Akira had slapped her. It didn't sting anymore, but the memory was still painful.

I asked for it, she thought to herself, *I rebelled against him. I purposely tried to piss him off.*

She shut her eyes.

Why did I do that? I love Onii-sama. But I love my freedom too.

'Oh, Yusaku!' Shoichi chirped as the student stepped into the truck. 'What's up? Why are you up at this hour?'

'I knew it!' Ai quipped, its body emerging from the Duel Disk. It was jumping up and down while pointing an accusing finger at its master. 'You lied to Aoi-chan! You didn't make plans after all!'

'Be quiet.' Yusaku hissed.

Shoichi frowned. 'Huh? What's going on?'

'Never mind that.' Yusaku snapped. 'I came here unexpectedly because... I need to ask a favour, actually.'

'Sure. What is it?'

Yusaku inhaled deeply. Here goes nothing.

'Kusanagi-san... Do you have any women's clothes lying around?'

'The *hell*?' Shoichi's jaw dropped. 'No, I don't. What kind of guy do you think I am?'

'I didn't mean it like that.' the younger man sighed. 'I just... I need them.'

Shoichi raised a brow. 'Yusaku, *why*?'

'Ooh, good idea, Yusaku-chan!' Ai squealed. 'Aoi-chan will need clothes for tomorrow!'

'Zaizen's younger sister needs clothes?' Shoichi was just getting more and more confused by the second. 'Don't they have more than enough money to buy their own?'

'Yusaku-chan and Aoi-chan are having a sleepover!'

'I said, be quiet!'

'Oh!' the hot dog vendor grinned. 'That's nice! Are you guys getting along, then?'

'It's not a sleepover.' Yusaku snapped. 'She fought with her brother, so she came over. She didn't bring any clothes with her, but judging from how upset she was, she'll want to stay longer than one night.'

Shoichi took a minute to think before responding, 'She can just go home herself and get some of her own clothes.'

Yusaku stiffened. 'I don't think she'd want to do that.'

'Why not?'

'One, Aoi left home in the first place so that means she wouldn't be comfortable going back. Two, if I let her go and she doesn't go back, my rejection would only worsen her negative emotions. Three...' he thought about it. 'If she does go back, her brother will just fight her again.'

'They fought? That's sad. What about?'

'Akira found out that Yusaku-chan is his little sister's lover.' Ai blurted.

'Oh, *no*.' Shoichi's face paled. 'Yusaku, you should be bringing her home *now*. Are you insane? Zaizen's going to murder you guys if he finds out she's sleeping over at your place!'

'I can't make her leave. I have an obligation.'

'Dude, you're not her husband.' Ai pointed out.

'Not that kind of obligation.' Yusaku corrected. 'I'm just saying that she trusts me with her feelings, so I'm going to care for her until she's well enough to return to her brother.'

'But in the meantime, you're fuelling the fire.' Shoichi shook his head. 'She needs to go back to him and sort it out. Yusaku... Don't get involved in family affairs. It's not your place.'

'But he likes her!' Ai whined.

'That's beside the point. Yusaku, it's not like Zaizen Akira could ever be just a brother to his sister. He *raised* her. He's *still* raising her. She's practically his daughter! You can't get between a father and his child, it's not going to work out for you! Especially if Zaizen believes that the reason he and his sister are being torn apart is because of interference from you!'

'Aoi trusts me.' Yusaku was adamant. 'I can't just throw her out. And if I force her to confront her brother before she's ready, then that outcome will just be another disaster.'

Shoichi grunted in frustration. He rubbed his temples and exhaled slowly, 'I know you're just gonna do what you believe in, so... No matter what I say, you've already made up your mind.'

Yusaku said nothing.

Shoichi continued, 'Just try not to get yourself in too much trouble.'

'I won't. Thanks, Kusanagi-san.'

'Yay!' Ai twirled around comically. 'Yusaku-chan's moved in with his girlfriend!'

'She hasn't moved in.' Yusaku glowered. 'And she's not my girlfriend.'

'Sure, Yusaku.' Shoichi rolled his eyes. 'Sure. You better get out of here to buy clothes for your not-girlfriend before the stores close. Here.' he reached into his wallet and handed his companion a random amount in bills. 'Use that.'

'Thanks, Kusanagi-san. I'll pay you back soon.'

'It's fine. You do a lot for me around here anyway.'

Yusaku smiled. 'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it.' the older man smiled back. 'Anyway, is Zaizen's sister settled into your place well?'

'Her brother's loaded, right?' Ai wondered aloud. 'So she must live in one of those fancy high-rises.' it turned to Yusaku. 'Your place must suck in comparison to hers.'

'Shut up.'

'Ah... They must have a nice view in their apartment.' Shoichi looked up at the ceiling. 'I always wondered what it would be like to live so high up. The only time I got to enjoy a view like that is when I checked out the ferris wheel in town...'

'Maybe you should take her to ride the ferris wheel, Yusaku.' Ai suddenly declared. 'To get her mind off things.'

'Sure.' Shoichi laughed. 'Then Yusaku can ask his not-girlfriend to actually be his girlfriend-girlfriend.'

Yusaku ignored that comment.

Akira stirred in his sleep.

When he came to, he realized that he was still in the car. His hands were still on the steering wheel, but thankfully, the engine was shut off. He checked his watch; almost midnight. He must have been asleep for hours. How did that happen? Well, his argument with Aoi was beyond exhausting. He hadn't expected to hit her, so when it finally happened, it felt like all the stress and anxiety he was holding in had culminated into that one minute. Yet now, he was regretting it. He shouldn't have hurt her. He knew her better than anyone. Whenever she was hurt, she just rebelled more.

But what could he do now? Aoi ran off to stay with that good-for-nothing boy. What was Akira to do? Sure, he had half a mind to barge into the building and yell for his little stepsister. Then again, Aoi might just get even angrier and retaliate further.

Akira hung his head low and sighed. What was he supposed to do? He drove her with the intention of hauling Aoi back, but at this point, he was so unsure of himself he might as well have taken a hammer and bonked himself on the head with it.

Then, he suddenly heard footsteps from a good distance in front of him. He raised his head and was shocked to see Yusaku walking back to the building with a plastic bag in hand. Akira didn't even realize that the young student left. Was Aoi still inside?

Groggy and impulsive from drowsiness and emotions, Akira stepped out of the car and rushed over to his sister's secret lover. Upon hearing him approaching, Yusaku turned his head to face him. Though Yusaku was surprised, his expression gave none of that away. He looked cool as a cucumber.

It irritated Akira.

'Where is my sister?' he demanded. 'Where's Aoi?'

'She's at my place.' Yusaku replied calmly. 'But you already know that, otherwise you wouldn't be here.'

'Hand her over! She's not yours to keep!' Akira's voice rose. He couldn't help the emotion building up inside of him. He half-wanted to scream and melt into the ground, but he also wanted to choke Aoi's lover to death. Akira was on a pendulum swing between pain and murderous intent. He couldn't decide which end of the spectrum he wanted to be on.

'She's nobody's.' Yusaku shrugged. 'Aoi is her own person. She can do what she wants.'

'Aoi is young. She doesn't know what she wants!'

'Then let her figure that out for herself.'

'And how is she supposed to do that with you using her-'

'I am *not* using her.'

'You don't even respect her.'

'*Of course* I respect her.'

'Shut up!' Akira grit his teeth. 'I'm not ignorant! You think I don't know what you two do behind my back?!'

'I know that you care for her, but what Aoi and I do is honestly none of your business.'

Akira scoffed. 'How arrogant. Do you think you're such a hotshot because Aoi thinks she wants *you*?'

Yusaku's heart skipped a beat. Then, a flare of anger burst from inside of him. 'Are you upset because Aoi wants to get *away* from *you?*'

'*Fuck you*.'

Yusaku said nothing back, but his smouldering green eyes bore right into Akira's cold gaze. The two stared each other in a silent challenge of authority. Akira was, undoubtedly between the two, the more important man in Aoi's life. But Yusaku wasn't about to allow himself to be perceived as a threat to Aoi. He cared about her. Even though he may not be the man for her, he never wanted to hurt her.

Akira was the first one to move. He shook his head and spoke softly for the first time that evening, 'Aoi is a sensitive girl. She's gone through so much. I don't want her to go through more.'

'I don't want to put her through any more suffering.'

Akira cracked a bitter smile. Just a tiny, condescending tug of the lips; barely anything more than pity and resentment. 'Could've fooled me. You've done enough of that already.'

Guilt boiled in Yusaku's heart. He didn't know what to say to that, so he nodded and turned his back on Akira.

Hey guys, thank you so much for reading and reviewing this story! Thanks for reading this chapter as well and I responded to you privately if you have accounts. For those who don't, a general thank you to all the support you give! And to those asking about Yusaku and Aoi interacting in LINK VRAINS: I have plans for that, but there's still quite a while to write into the story in their real-life selves.

Yujo147, thank you so much for all the continued support you give me! I tried to keep Yusaku calm in light of the recent events because he generally just gives off that demeanour. Rather than explicitly get him to show his anxiety/guilt, I tried to write it up as an internal conflict within him instead. Hope you enjoy this chapter!

10. Day I - Tense

When Yusaku entered his room again, he expected to find Aoi asleep. Imagine his surprise when he opened the door to be greeted by the sound of chatter. Specifically, Aoi and Ai were engaged in what seemed to be an animated conversation. He could even hear Aoi laughing; What the hell? Why would Aoi be laughing? Ai's jokes were never funny.

'You're so funny!' Aoi complimented Ai, much to Yusaku's chagrin.

'Thank you!' Ai chirped. 'Finally! Someone recognizes my genius sense of humour.'

'She's just being polite.' Yusaku interjected, walking up to the pair, who were conversing from a distance. Aoi was seated on the bed and Ai was chatting with her through its case up in the wall. But upon seeing Yusaku, Aoi jumped from the bed and made her way to him. They met at the bottom of the stairs leading to the bedroom.

'Welcome home.' she smiled. Yusaku's heart skipped a beat. 'Where did you go?'

'Nowhere.' he cleared his throat and handed her the plastic bag he was carrying. All without looking at her in the eye, of course. 'Here. Take it.'

'Huh? What is this?'

'Just take it.'

Confused, she did as she was told. But she didn't look into it. She simply placed it on the ground and watched Yusaku's movements. Once he handed her the bag, he sighed and walked past her to his cabinet, where he kept his clothes. Without much care, he removed his school jacket and tie before unbuttoning his shirt. He had a difficult night. All he wanted to do was get ready for bed-

Wait.

'Shit.' he cursed aloud. He just realized that he couldn't change into his sleepwear. Aoi was here, which meant that she was going to have the bed. He could sleep sitting up, but there would be no need for him to change clothes then. Reluctantly, he began redoing the buttons of his top.

Aoi noticed what was going on. From the second he walked in, she could tell that he was tired. Though she didn't know that it was because he was emotionally drained from his encounter with Akira, she at least could recognize that he was in dire need of rest. She really didn't want to take his place in bed. If he wouldn't share it with her, then she decided that she'd rather sleep on the floor. 'Hey...' she began. 'Come on. Don't do that.'

'Don't do what?' he demanded. Aoi winced. He really wasn't in the mood.

'It's OK.' she went over to him and placed her hands on his to stop him from completely buttoning his shirt up. 'Change your clothes. Go to bed.'

'The bed is yours.'

'No! I'd rather you have it.'

'You must be joking.' he frowned down at her. Was she insulting his sense of chivalry? 'Do you really think that I would kick you out of the bed for my own comfort?'

'Yusaku, you're not kicking me out of anywhere. It's your own bed!'

'And you're going to sleep in it.' his tone turned firm. 'End of discussion.'

Aoi exhaled, exasperated. This man was so stubborn. It almost infuriated her. She was already saying that it was fine. He didn't have to go off and snap at her for it. Besides, it's not like they were dating so he had no real obligation to ensure her wellbeing; a point he's made numerous times. Aoi allowed herself to sink into her own thoughts for a minute. She had to figure out a way out to get him to relax...

'Why can't we just share the bed?'

Yusaku's jaw dropped.

'There's more than enough space for the both of us.' she reasoned. 'I'll be comfortable.'

Oh, that sounded so tempting. Yusaku's eyelids were heavy and he was successfully being seduced by his mattress' siren call. He was about to accept Aoi's offer, but was startled by his own realization that he had a tendency to awaken violently in the middle of the night because of nightmares. Whenever he slept in a sitting position at Shoichi's truck or at school, he never had those episodes. It was only in his bed wherein he experienced these terrors.

What if Aoi found out?

'No.' he refused. 'I can't. I-'

'Yes, you can.' she insisted. Now she swatted his hands away from the buttons of his shirt and began undoing them herself. He couldn't move. Firstly, because he thought that it would be rude to push her away and secondly, because the sight of Aoi undressing him always paralyzed him. He could never get used to her being in such close proximity to him, doing something so intimate for him.

Soon, his torso was bare. His clothes were strewn carelessly over the table in the corner of his room. Perhaps he would fold them later. But with Aoi's hands casually unbuckling his belt, he wondered if they'd be caught up in the moment again and wind up in each other's arms.

He didn't think that was such a bad idea.

'Come on.' Aoi urged, fumbling with the belt buckle. She never wore one, so she had no idea how to get it undone. 'You can do this yourself.'

Wordlessly, he complied with her order. He finally managed to remove his belt from his waist. Then, with his eyes burning into hers, he unbuttoned his

pants and unzipped. Aoi's eyes darted down to watch him expose more skin. Her cheeks tinged pink and her heartbeat quickened.

'Are you going to keep watching me, Aoi?'

'N-No...' she turned her back to him. 'So... Are you coming to bed.'

'Sure. I don't think you'd let me do otherwise.'

She smiled to herself. 'Yeah...'

'You should get changed yourself.'

'I didn't bring any clothes with me.'

'You can borrow a shirt of mine for the evening.' he suggested, wincing that he forgot to buy her clothes to sleep in. Oh, well. At least she had something for tomorrow. He made a mental note to put her uniform in the wash in the morning. 'It'll probably be too big for you, but...'

'Thank you.'

When Yusaku finished changing into his pyjamas, he reached into a drawer and fished for one of his plain, black shirts. He handed it to her and she got changed in his bathroom. The whole time she was in there, a million thoughts were running through his mind. They were going to share the same bed - what the hell! They were seriously going to spend the night together; a scenario that he was trying desperately to avoid. And yet now here they were, ready to climb onto the same mattress. What if he accidentally rolled over to her side during the night? What if he subconsciously reached for her? What if she decided that she didn't like being with him because he was a shitty person to sleep beside?

Aoi climbed into bed and beckoned him to join her. He hesitated for a second before finally giving in. He slid beside her and avoided her eyes as he lay down.

'Good night, Yusaku.'

He didn't reply. Instead, he shut his eyes and prayed that he wouldn't have an episode tonight.

'Hehe... I forgot that you're a bad drunk.' Emma Bessho giggled mischievously as she pat Akira's back soothingly. He just downed his fifth shot of whatever-it-was and was now keeling over the bar counter in pain. His head was spinning and the contents of his stomach were burning the back of his throat, threatening to spill all over the surprisingly impeccable woodwork. How hadn't he noticed this? He'd been living here now for a few years.

After his encounter with Yusaku, Akira sped back home with his mind on one thing; constructing a game plan. The only ally he had outside of his workplace was Emma, so he thought to call her. But there was no way he could meet her by the bridge - he had to get the car back to his residence, after all. He thought about meeting up with Emma in LINK VRAINS, but decided that he didn't want to talk about family affairs over the net. Against his better judgement, he thought that he should invite her over to his place.

But by the time she arrived, he had already one too many drinks.

And when she showed up with her perpetual smirk and holier-than-thou aura, all the pent-up frustration he held against her over the years was starting to spill at the seams. He hated the sight of her. He had only sucked it in for this long because he needed to seek her services whenever his duties at SOL Technologies prompted him to. But the truth was that even just being in the same space as her was a mortifyingly bitter experience.

He hated seeing her. But what he hated more was the idea that they could never see each other again.

Due to his drunken stupor, Akira didn't realize that he was glaring at Emma intensely. She frowned back at him, but he couldn't register that he was upsetting her. Emma realized this.

'What are you doing, Akira?'

'I'm thinking that maybe this is my karma.' he swallowed dryly. 'That Aoi is bound to repeat the same mistakes I did - all because of the dirty work I did. The dirty work that led me to you, since it *is* your industry.'

Emma narrowed her eyes. 'Dirty work? Please. It's just hacking.'

'You know what I mean.' he snapped, glaring at her with drunken dizziness. 'What I did was illegal. What *you* do *is* illegal.'

She shrugged. 'So what?'

'So, I shouldn't have done it. And because of my sins... Aoi is going to follow my footsteps.'

'You're drunk.' she let out a hollow chuckle. Then, she reached for the bottle of alcohol and moved it by her side, away from Akira's hands. 'I'll take this away from you.'

'Fuck you, Emma.'

'Mhmm...' she hummed, totally unbothered by his verbal attack. 'Such a terrible drunk... You know, I don't appreciate being referred to as a mistake.'

'Well, you are.' Akira snapped. 'And I hope not a day goes by where you don't remember how badly you hurt me.'

'There's no use arguing with you. You're drunk.'

'I'm not drunk.'

'How convincing.'

'Emma!' he buried his face in his hands and rubbed vigorously. His fingers intertwined in his hair as though he wanted to pull it clean off of his scalp. His frustration couldn't be clearer. 'I don't need your sass right now! Just looking at you makes me sick! You-'

And he went on and on and on. None of what he said was making much sense, but Emma let him mouth off anyway. By now, she was used to the bouts of anger Akira had for her. She knew that it wasn't really who he was. Akira wasn't an angry person; he was a sensitive man. So whenever he was being overly aggressive, it was usually reactionary from being hurt. Whether it be about Aoi or her or anything else, Akira had a tendency to challenge his pain into anger. That wasn't ideal, but Emma had learned to read his confusing flurry of emotions with accurate ease.

'You *used* me.' Akira accused, and that caught Emma's attention. 'You knew how I felt about you, and yet-'

'I didn't use you.' she interjected. 'I was going with the flow. From the beginning, we agreed that we wouldn't take ourselves too seriously.'

'It felt pretty serious when you randomly disappeared off the face of the Earth!'

She shrugged. 'There was no point in continuing to see you.'

Akira laughed bitterly. 'But you didn't have to ghost me like that! That was insulting!'

'You know I have no interest in men without power or money.'

'Which probably explains why you reappeared before me when I finally acquired both.'

Emma frowned deeply. Not a lot of things got under her skin, but that last comment was hitting her where it was bothersome. 'I'm not like that. I showed myself to you again when your company acquired my services. It just so happened that your previous position as Security Manager meant that you'd have to deal with me directly.'

'I hate you.'

'Alright.' she sighed and stood up. Then, she hooked an arm around Akira's back and led him to his feet as well. He gave no resistance, but he was heavy; thankfully, Emma was stronger than most people and was able to carry his weight. He was stumbling, but she managed to keep him on the right path to his bedroom. Throughout the entire walk, he was cursing her. But it didn't bother Emma. Not a lot of things did.

Without delicacy, Emma practically shoved Akira to his bed. He landed on his back and groaned at the impact. He then covered his face with his hands and moaned, 'My fucking head hurts.'

'Yep.'

'Shut up.'

'You know...' Emma huffed. What a workout. 'I thought you had a job lined up for me, but in the end, you needed me to babysit you - get yourself together, Akira.'

'Don't tell me what to do.'

With that, Emma believed that it was time she take her leave. She rolled her eyes and bid farewell to Akira, asking if he would be alright. He didn't answer her, but she knew that he would be. He always would be. He just had a tendency to take things a little too far... Especially when it came to Aoi. Though he may never admit it, Emma knew that Akira was struggling to accept that Aoi was becoming an adult. He was afraid that his little sister wouldn't need him anymore and that she would be hurt as a result of refusing his protection.

What Emma was struggling to grasp was why Akira was suddenly reminded of their past together. She genuinely thought that was water under the bridge. Furthermore, she didn't think that he had feelings that she used him - she never did. But she was young and full of life and being committed was the last thing she wanted to do.

And that was why she and Akira could never work out; he took his life seriously and Emma wanted to lead a life free of pain and full of adventure. Being with Akira meant giving up all the opportunities she could have as a free bird. And she wasn't about to give up her freedom for anyone.

Yusaku was facing a Duel Arena.

He turned his gaze to the side, then above, then below, before settling back to straight ahead. Nothing was present in this world except for his apparent opponent; a silhouette of a human man who was currently beating him in their battle. The thing was; Yusaku didn't remember how the duel started nor was he familiar with the cards in front of him. The formation of his field was strange. It felt like the strategic set up of a novice. There was no way he could win with this!

His opponent made their move; it was decided that they would enter the battle phase.

A dragon appeared in front of Yusaku with its jaws wide open.

YOU LOSE

'Agh!' Yusaku screamed at the top of his lungs as he rose to a sitting position.

His fingers were clutching his bedsheets with enough force to draw blood had his fingers been digging directly into his palm. He was trembling all over. Why couldn't he stop trembling? His head was pounding and he swore that the room was shaking. It was hard to breathe. Every inhale felt like swallowing a chunk of glass shards. Why was it painful to breathe?

'Yusaku!' Aoi got up and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Yusaku, what-'

He couldn't answer her. In reality, he couldn't even hear her. He was too focused on his own laboured breathing, on the spinning room, on the nauseating pressure at the back of his throat; he felt like he was dying. He

swore that he could feel remnants of electricity still crawling on his skin. He was afraid that he could be electrocuted at any moment, as if he were still in captivity even though he could clearly see that he was in his own room.

It didn't make sense, but it never does.

But the fear is so *real*. It tightens around him, coils around his neck like a noose about to hang him. For the past ten years, he's never had a day of peace wherein fear or thirsty vindication didn't dominate every urge in his body.

'Yusaku...'

Aoi reached for his shoulder, but he flinched. Nevertheless, the surprisingly contact snapped him out of his stupor somewhat. He was slowly realizing who he was, what year it was, where he was; like he was only waking up from his nightmare now even though his eyes have been open for well over a minute.

'Shh...' Aoi rubbed his back soothingly. When she felt his muscles relax slightly, she reached out and pulled him into an embrace with his head cradled in her arms to her chest. He was breathing hard - the poor thing. She could feel his clammy skin. He had broken out into a cold sweat in his nightmares. 'Shh...' she repeated, even softer this time. Her touch was feathery. Yusaku felt as if he was being coddled by a flurry of birds. And strangely, his nerves were calming. Though they were still active and tearing him apart inside out, he felt somehow that he could manage it - that screaming wasn't the only way to regain control.

He relaxed in her arms.

'Yes...' she whispered. 'Just like that.'

Yusaku shut his eyes and his breathing slowed to normalcy.

Aoi smiled sadly to herself. She was relieved that he recovered somewhat, but it was viscerally painful to witness him go through something like this in the first experience. She knew about his past, but she didn't think that it affected him physiologically like this. Aoi lost her parents when she was younger. She knew the pain of tragedy, but it's not like she woke up in the middle of the night screaming. She decided that the difference between her ordeal and Yusaku's was that the latter involved punishment. And that memory, etched into Yusaku's mind for what probably felt like an eternity, would be his never-ending punishment.

'I'm so proud of you, Yusaku. You're so strong.'

He didn't respond, but he heard every word she said. This encouraged him to remain relaxed in her arms even as she moved her fingers around to stroke his matted hair. Then, slowly, she laid back down, taking him with her. Still, he didn't resist her. Eventually, he was able to go back to sleep with Aoi watching over him for the longest time until her eyelids weighed down on her consciousness.

Hey guys, thank you so much for all your reviews last chapter! I was very surprised by the feedback and your encouragement really touched my heart. I'm also very excited by all the suggestions you guys have been making. It's really helping shape the story.

Also, if you have an account, I have already privately messaged you a reply. Otherwise, I'll be replying to the guest reviewers down below.

JustARandomGuy, Revolver and Go will be appearing, but the next few chapters will be very much centred around Yusaku and Aoi!

Yujo0147, so glad you enjoyed those interactions! Aoi's "stomach problems" will be coming up later, and their classmates will start noticing things. That will be a few chapters way though!

Thanks again everyone, hope you enjoyed this chapter. Really looking forward to your feedback! And, as usual, suggestions are greatly

appreciated.

11. Day II - Tenser

Sunshine seeped into Yusaku's bedroom, warming his body pleasantly and stirring him awake. And for once in a very long time, he didn't feel like getting up. His body was too comfortable, enveloped by sheets that had never before felt so invitingly soft. The fact that he actually enjoyed his slumber was a rare treat for the normally sleep-deprived duelist.

Of course he knew that it had something to do with Aoi's presence. Or not necessarily presence, but her efforts (and success) at calming him during last night's episode. Suddenly remembering her, he rolled over and reached out to the side of his bed. However, his palm landed on nothing but a cold space on an empty mattress.

His eyes fluttered open.

Aoi wasn't beside him.

His heart sank.

'Aoi?' he called out without thinking. Did she leave? Was she frightened by his night terrors? Of course she would be turned off by what she saw last night. He was beyond embarrassed. He couldn't believe that Aoi was a witness to his post-traumatic attacks. There was no way she could take him seriously as a man now. Still, though he was expecting this outcome to come to fruition one day, he didn't think that it would sting this much. The notion that he drove her away with his persistent trauma was dangerous to his pride.

He felt so *small*.

'The babe's taking a shower, dummy.' Ai explained from his confinement in the glass container. 'Geez... Can't you hear the shower running?'

Yusaku listened intently.

Yes. Yes, he could hear water crashing down on the bathroom tiles. He hadn't noticed that before.

'Were you scared that she left you, Yusaku-chan?'

'Shut up.'

'Hehe, you *were*! You were scared that she left you!' Ai cooed. 'You're so cute!'

Yusaku sighed loudly, but ignored the Ignis. He shut his eyes again and relaxed into the bed. Now that he knew Aoi was still around, he could ease up a little bit and enjoy the lazy morning; a luxury that he rarely indulged in.

'Why don't you go in there and join her?' Ai teased.

'Be quiet.'

'What? Don't you want to feel Aoi-chan's love again?'

'*No.* Shut up.'

'Humph! So defiant... Well, just so you know, she saw the clothes you brought.'

'Ah...' Yusaku sat up and rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. Thank goodness he was asleep for *that*.

'She was so happy.' Ai flashed its master a thumbs up. 'Keep this up and she'll be your wife in no time!'

And Ai rambled on and on - Yusaku just tuned the Ignis out. Unfortunately, this purposeful, meditative detachment from reality also meant that he couldn't hear that the shower water had stopped running. Lost in the void of his mind, the teenager got up and began undoing his pyjamas. He managed to get his top off when Aoi stepped out of the bathroom, dressed in the new clothes that Yusaku bought last night.

'Good morning...' Aoi greeted, but Yusaku could neither see nor hear her. He was still concentrated on drowning his environment out and his back was turned to her. Aoi thought that maybe there was no use trying to get his attention, but changed her mind when he reached for the sash of his pants. 'Yusaku!' she cried out, laughing uncomfortably - this caused Yusaku to look back over his shoulder at her with a started expression. 'G-Good morning!' Aoi repeated, trying desperately not to look at his impressive torso.

'Good morning.' he returned, acting calm in the hopes that the sexual tension in the air would just... *disappear.* But it was impossible with her right in front of him, clad in white from head to toe in a long dress that was tantalizing in that it showed no skin but contoured the outline of her body. They were in such close proximity, and her feelings for him channelled so powerfully into physical intimacy, that if he reached out for her right now they would inevitably end up back on the bed, fighting for heat and control and love.

'Thank you for the clothes.' Aoi spoke again, snapping Yusaku out of his thoughts. 'I love them.'

'That's good.' he shrugged and walked past her to head to the shower. 'I borrowed money from Kusanagi-san to get those. So it's him you should thank and not me.'

Aoi nodded, but there was still something bothering her. 'U-Um... Yusaku, is there a reason why you chose those clothes?'

'Not really.' It was true. He just chose what he thought she wouldn't dislike.

'Oh...'

'Why?' he stopped in his tracks and flashed her a frown. 'Is there something wrong with them?'

'Well...' Aoi winced. 'I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but...'

'*But*?'

'Um...' she looked away and a light pink tinged her cheeks. 'They're just so tight.'

Yusaku now had a good excuse to look her over carefully. It didn't take long for a dark lick to run up his spine; Aoi was right. The dress was tight, but more because of its style than anything else. The fabric covered her entire body, from her ankles, to her wrists, and all the way up to her neck. Yet, it was fitted so that her shape was evident. It was a rarity for her real-life body to wear anything that complemented her in such a way that was as striking as this dress did. Its white color retained her innocent aura and her impossibly narrow waist was emphasized - an impossible accomplishment in Den City High School's baggy uniform.

'It's not *too* tight.' he eventually said.

'I don't look bad in it?'

'Of course not.' he was incredulous. 'Are you uncomfortable in it?'

'No... I can move around just fine.'

'Then you shouldn't worry.'

'Hmm...' Aoi's folded her arms over her chest defensively. 'I guess I'm just not used to wearing something like this.'

'But you would wear this as Blue Angel, right?' Yusaku pointed out. 'I don't see why Zaizen Aoi would dislike it.'

Those words struck a strange chord in Aoi; she misinterpreted it as him implying that he preferred her online persona. Which, in some way, shouldn't be a bad thing, right? Aoi *is* Blue Angel. At least, that's what one could say. But to Aoi, Blue Angel was the embodiment of all that she wanted to be but never would. Blue Angel was beautiful, strong, and free.

Aoi wanted to be all of those things, but felt it out of reach in her human capacity.

Of course Yusaku preferred Blue Angel.

Who wouldn't?

'Yeah...' she held herself tighter. 'I suppose you're right.'

Aoi liked the dress. She genuinely liked its design and how it fit on the body - just not how it fit on *her* body. Were her breasts and hips big enough? Was her waist small enough? Did her childish face look strange with such a sensual outfit? Aoi briefly looked at her reflection in the bathroom's mirror before stepping out and decided quickly then that she was too... *Aoi* to wear this dress gracefully.

It would suit Blue Angel much more.

'I'm going in, then.' Yusaku said when he presumed that there was nothing more to be said. He walked into his bathroom and locked the door. Soon, Aoi could hear the shower running. He wouldn't be out for a while, so she decided to be a good guest and make his bed. Then, she threw their clothes into the washing machine. After that, she surveyed the room but could see nothing else that needed to be done. It was so barren that cleaning up could take a second, especially with the help of Roboppi.

'Hey, Aoi-chan.' Ai chirped. 'You look hot in that dress!'

Aoi offered a half-smile. 'Thanks.'

With its extensive database of human facial expressions and their corresponding emotions, Ai could infer that something was off with this girl. 'What's wrong?'

'I just think this dress would suit Blue Angel better.'

'Huh? But Aoi-chan *is* Blue Angel.'

I wish, she thought to herself but said nothing to respond directly. 'I'm going to step out... Will Yusaku be here tonight?'

'I'm sure. It's his home, after all.'

'Alright... Then I'll be back tonight.'

'Where are you going, Aoi-chan?'

'Anywhere!' she laughed as she climbed the stairs on her way out of the apartment.

By the time Yusaku stepped out of the bathroom in his school uniform (even though there were no classes today), Aoi was long gone. He looked around, confused. Was Aoi hiding? Wasn't she here? Did he dream up the whole thing? But then he noticed that his bed had been made and that the washing machine was operating, so he knew that the past 24 hours was indeed his reality.

'Your baby stepped out.' Ai explained. 'She said she'll be back.'

Yusaku blushed. 'She's not my baby.'

'Really? Isn't that what you call her when you're having sex, though?'

Yusaku's whole body went up in flames.

Yusaku spent the day doing some work with Shoichi Kusanagi, who didn't ask about Aoi. Although, Yusaku could tell that his partner-in-crime was thinking about it. The older man would look over the student, open his mouth, then decided against it and continue on with whatever he was doing on the computer. However, there was an unspoken rule between them; never ask the touchy stuff. Since Yusaku's outburst at seeing Blue Angel flirt with her opponent, Shoichi decided that it was for the best that the teenager handle this situation by himself. Besides, Shoichi hoped that the bond

between himself and Yusaku was powerful enough so that if Yusaku ever did need help with Aoi, he could just ask for it.

As for Yusaku, he had successfully managed to get Aoi out of his head. He was so into his work that he completely forgot that she was staying over at his place. And that was the problem with Yusaku; he had spent so much of his life fazing everything around him out so that he lived in this bubble of vengeance. He thought that after getting closure about the Lost Incident that he could lead a new life, but shedding the skin of his trauma was proving to be tougher than he anticipated. Because trauma wasn't skin - he couldn't get rid of it by cutting it out. He needed to heal, but didn't know how.

Until he could do that, Aoi would forever be an afterthought, no matter how his feelings for her evolved.

'And we're done.' Shoichi happily declared. 'You can go home now.'

'Yeah.' Yusaku smiled. 'Thanks.'

Shoichi cleared his throat. He'd been dying to ask Yusaku about Aoi, but knew that there was no way to do so without sounding off the alarm bells in his friend's mind. So he subtly asked, 'Any plans for tonight?'

Yusaku frowned. 'No. Why?'

'No reason.' Shoichi sighed. 'Forget it.'

'He wants to know if you and Aoi are going on a date!' Ai interjected.

'Oh.' Yusaku's visage paled. He finally remembered that Aoi was encroaching on his life more than he was necessarily comfortable with. Damn, had it gone so far already? That people assumed that he and her would have plans for the weekend evenings? 'No... I forgot about her, actually.'

'That's the problem.' Shoichi grumbled.

'What was that, Kusanagi-san?'

'Nothing, Yusaku. Nothing at all.'

So Yusaku went back home, wondering the whole while where Aoi could have gone off to. She didn't so much as text him. But surely she was alright, wasn't she? Before he could seriously worry, he caught sight of Aoi waiting by his building. His breath caught in his throat. She was lovely in that purely white dress illuminated by the soft glow of moonlight. Did she walk around town in that? A flash of jealousy struck him, but he desperately fought it back.

He brought his attention back to her. She was holding a small bag. It appeared that she had gone shopping.

'Good evening.' Aoi greeted when Yusaku came up to her, then motioned for her to follow him as he keyed the building door. 'How was your day?' she asked as they climbed the steps.

'Fine.' he answered tightly. 'Yours?'

'Good. I got you something.'

'You got me something?'

'Mhmm... I thought it might help with the nightmares.'

Yusaku stiffened.

'Don't worry.' she reassured. 'It's not medicine.'

'Then what is it?'

'You'll see.'

They entered his apartment unit and the tension between them increased tenfold. Aoi want straight to the washing machine to take out the wet clothes and place them in the dryer. Yusaku whispered a soft 'Thank you,' to

which Aoi nodded. He then placed Ai in the desk, not bothering to lock it up. At this point, Yusaku trusted it not to be stupid just because Aoi was around. With a loud sigh aimed at the ceiling, he removed the clothes from the top half of his body. He was about to change out of his pants until Aoi called out.

'Wait! Don't change yet.'

Yusaku clicked his tongue irritably. 'Were you watching me again, Aoi? Why do you always watch me? Don't watch me!'

'I wasn't watching you!' she hissed back, angry and embarrassed. 'I glanced over and saw you!'

'That's the same as watching!'

'Whatever! That's besides the point...'

'What?' he headed over to his bed and sat down at its foot, burying his face in his hands. He was so *tired*. He just wanted to get to bed but his fucking pseudo-roommate wouldn't let him. She was sapping his energy away. He couldn't even change in peace. The tension between them hung so heavily in the air that he was sure he could be crushed at any moment.

'I got you this.' she fished a hand into the bag she was carrying and retrieved a small bottle of scented oil.

'What's that?'

'It's an oil to massage you with.'

Yusaku's jaw dropped. 'You want to give me an oil massage?' he spoke slowly as if he were trying to make sense of the words as they tumbled out of his mouth.

'Well, I was thinking that I should at least try something to help...'

'*Fine*.' he chuckled dryly. He didn't really want to take any part in this, but knew that he would never be able to find it in himself to reject Aoi when she was only trying to be helpful. But he resolved to show just how horrible this experience was going to be for him to discourage her from any future attempts to help him out like this. 'I'll try it.'

Aoi smiled softly. 'I'll just change out of my clothes.'

'Why won't you let me do the same?'

'Because it makes no sense. I can't massage you with your clothes on. You can change into your pyjamas after I'm done with you.'

He nodded hesitantly. 'You can borrow another one of my shirts to sleep in tonight.'

'Thanks.'

He thought she would get out of his field of vision to change out of her clothes, but she undid the zipper of the dress in front of him. But at the first glimpse of flesh, he looked away. His heart was already hammering against his chest. Seeing her bare did something to him; he loses his mind a little bit, overcome with the desire to hold her and feel the warmth of her body.

Don't you want to feel Aoi's love again?

He didn't believe that he deserved it.

After changing into a baggy black shirt, Aoi hopped on top of the mattress and positioned herself behind Yusaku. He rolled his eyes and waited to feel her hands on him. He could hear her rubbing the oil into her hands, taking her leisurely time. He was ready to bark at her that he was exhausted and wanted to get this over with quickly, but the first knead at his stiff shoulders had him hissing with pain.

'Ah, damn it.' he groaned. He hunched over and pressed his elbows to his knees, trying to distract himself from the hurt. The hell was Aoi doing? Was

she always this strong? It felt like she was taking a jackhammer to his body. 'Ow, ow... *Damn*, Aoi.'

'Ha... It's because you're so tense. Your muscles are all knotted up...'

They really were. She was barely touching him and he was already complaining so much. She thought it was hilarious, but imagined that it wasn't at all funny to him. Nevertheless, she continued massaging him strategically as she had hope that this would alleviate some of his discomfort when sleeping. If she could help him somewhat, then she was willing to give this method a try. Her partner would just have to suck it up.

But as her hands continued running over his body, she noticed the fine details of him that she hadn't had the time to drink in before. Perhaps it was how the moonlight bounced over the oil, but the ridges of his muscles appeared deeper and more defined than she thought. She knew that he was fit, but it had completely gone over her head that he was *fit*. Though she was kneading his flesh, it was impossible for her to pinch any softness in him. Her lustful admiration of his figure had sparked a sudden desire to kiss the length of his spine, but she felt that it was inappropriate. She was supposed to be a good roommate - she shouldn't be imposing her sexual urges on him.

It's not like they were girlfriend-boyfriend, wherein such interactions would be free and beautiful. They were two separate individuals. Aoi wondered if they were even friends. Every time they had sex, they would either fight or be awkward; no way was she going to risk that when he was gracious enough to lend her his space.

So Aoi kept to herself, massaging him in silence, trying desperately not to look at him even though her gaze was glued to the muscular indentations of his back and a thousand needy thoughts were swirling in her mind.

The whole experience was a tense situation for Yusaku as well. He was very aware of the presence of a woman that he had feelings for behind him, touching him, breathing on his skin in a much more tame manner than when he was inside of her, riding her, and every exhale she made it into his neck

would feel like scalding embers that burnt him all the way to between his legs.

Yeah.

He had to find a way to distract himself.

'Smells nice.' he commented after clearing his throat. He didn't know how to thank her for her efforts, nor did he want to say anything that she could misinterpret (or correctly interpret) as him having feelings for her. So he decided that he should at least make a remark about their current predicament. The safest option was probably to talk about the scent of the oil. There was no way that the tension between them could escalate from that, right?

Well.

'It's lavender.' she revealed. 'Apparently, it's a calming agent... I thought that maybe it could ease your mind a bit.'

'I see. That's thoughtful of you.'

'Mm... It's the least I could since you're letting me stay here...'

He nodded. After a moment of deliberation, he added, 'You smell like lavender too, you know that?'

'Well, that's the scent of the oil.'

'No, I mean, even without it. When I kiss down your neck...' he said without thinking. 'I inhale lavender.'

Aoi's fingers froze.

Then, as if burned by him, she withdrew her hands quickly.

'Aoi?' Yusaku turned around to face her. His features were settled uncharacteristically softly on his face. His tone was tender and it killed her

to know that he was probably acting like this just to be nice to her, not because he had serious feelings towards her. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.' she lied. Of course something was wrong. Her lustful desires that stemmed from unrequited love were becoming stronger. It was physically paining her to be so close to him, holding him, breathing the same air as him, and being unable to act on her feelings. It was starting to feel like a sick joke. They had sex numerous times; why was initiating it now so awkward? Perhaps it was also her fear getting the best of her. Each and every time they messed around, Yusaku would waste no time in crushing her heart right after. She didn't think that she had enough strength to go through another round of rejection. She would rather stay put quietly, never expecting him to be loving to her; it was so much less painful.

Or at least she thought it would be.

These past nights were starting to take a toll on her spirit.

'Do you miss your home?' he questioned, wondering if that was why she was acting strangely.

'Yeah. I love the view from my room.' she recalled with painful happiness. 'I can see so much of the city. It's so pretty when the lights are up.'

He didn't say anything back for a while. He just stared at her, watching her sad eyes wobble and her hands tremble on her lap. Then, he reached out and held her hands in his. 'Do you like views?'

Aoi laughed half-heartedly. 'Who doesn't?'

Yusaku remembered Shoichi mentioning that there was a ferris wheel in town. Riding that to the top would give one the pleasure of the best view of the city. A lightbulb went off in the duelist's head; If he took Aoi there, maybe she would cheer up a little. He appreciated her efforts to help him out, but he could tell that she was masking feelings of sadness. Little did he know that it was less to do about being homesick and all to do with her struggling to accept that Yusaku would never return her feelings explicitly.

'I'll take you somewhere tomorrow.' he said. 'Assuming you don't have plans.'

Aoi found the courage to look at him again. Her heart twisted at how handsome he was; Yusaku with the smouldering, vivid eyes that were mysteriously unreadable. She wished that there was love behind that cold gaze of his for her. A while ago, just wishing alone was good enough for her. But now, it was taking too much of her energy. She hated the tension between them almost as much as she hated the fact that since she got here, he's only kissed her once.

When they went to bed that night, Aoi had trouble falling asleep. She couldn't stop thinking about the body next to her. The texture of his skin was practically etched into the back of her head. She had shared so many firsts with Yusaku; touch, kiss, *everything*. She made the conscious decision to share all of that with him knowing that it would inevitably affect her for the rest of her life. And when he told her earlier that she smelled of lavender, it shocked her because she never thought that he would remember her like that.

So it got her thinking; down the line, would he remember her? Every bit of happiness and pain she felt now; would any of it matter to him?

Because she knew that no matter what happened, she was always going to think of him with bittersweet fondness. That even when they separate and have their own lives with different people, she was going to remember how his tongue danced with hers, and how warm his body got when he held her, and how sweetly he called her his 'beautiful baby' - the only time when Yusaku said she was beautiful. She would cherish all those memories because he was always going to be the first man she fell in love with.

Was he still going to recall the scent of lavender on her neck once he's fallen in love with a different girl? A girl who was more like Blue Angel.

Yusaku's breathing evened, indicating that he had fallen asleep.

Aoi let tears seep through the corners of her eyes as she stared into nothingness. Her body shook slightly with the urge to cry out, but she steadied herself by biting into a fist. She didn't want to make a sound or movement that could alert Yusaku or Ai; she just wanted to cry silently and be alone in her thoughts.

Hey guys, thank you so much for reading and reviewing this story thus far!

If you've got accounts, then I've responded to you in private messaging.

Yujo0147, thank you again for your continued encouragement! Akira and Emma will play different parts in that, but you are correct in your guess. And Yusaku is opening up a little to Aoi, but she can no longer appreciate it because she's been rejected so often. But in the next chapter, Yusaku may surprise her!

Thanks guys. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

12. Day III - Too Far

'You want to go on that... With me?' Aoi tilted her head, perplexed by the idea that Yusaku would want to do anything with her other than have sex. They were at a park that ran throughout the year, of which the ferris wheel was the main attraction. Yusaku woke her up early and insisted that they go on it. She thought he was joking last night, but now she made a mental note to remember that *everything* that came out of Yusaku's mouth was dead-serious.

'What?' he smiled. 'Are you scared or something?'

That irritated Aoi. She frowned and huffed an arrogant '*No*,' before marching in front of him on the way to the ride. Yusaku raised a brow and follow close behind her, amused by her inability to resist a challenge. Unlike himself, Aoi was quick to fire back when provoked. Yusaku liked to take a step back and analyze the situation before making his move, but Aoi always nosedived into potential danger.

Fearless, brave Aoi.

Yusaku liked that about her.

When the pair finally got into one of the passenger cars of the ferris wheel, they sat in silence as they ascended the skies. It wasn't uncomfortable, but they usually had nothing much to say anyways. Though they would never explicitly express it (Aoi for fear of being perceived as weak and Yusaku out of fear of being vulnerable) they enjoyed each other's physical presence just as much as they did good conversation. Consequently, they do not feel the need to create a discussion when there was none to be had - because there was no awkwardness in the intimate quiet of the atmosphere.

Excited about the view, Aoi turned her attention to the direction of the oceanside. Her heart beat faster; it was stunning, even though they weren't at the top yet. She didn't have a good view of the ocean from her room back home, so this may very well have been the first time she was seeing so much water all at once. It surprised her just how beautifully the sunshine

glimmered, its light bouncing prettily along the rising and falling of the miniature waves.

'You look like you're having fun.' Yusaku observed. Aoi's attention turned to him; he was sitting opposite her with a stoic expression. Though his features were rigidly secretive, his body language suggested that he was relaxed. He was hunched forward with his elbows on his knees and his watchful gaze, though lacking in warmth, held no frustration or anger. Aoi thought that he might have started to become irritated with her, but she was glad to observe that he didn't seem to mind spending the past few days together.

'I've just never been on something like this before.' she replied. 'It's exciting to see so much at once.'

'I thought you said that you have a good view at home.'

'This view is better.'

'We're not even at the top yet.' he reminded her, finally cracking a small smile. 'And you're already so happy.'

'Well...' she pondered her next words carefully. 'It's also because I'm spending time with you.'

With an uncomfortable blush, Yusaku averted his gaze. Then, his posture straightened and he folded his arms over his chest. His heart was racing at a million miles a minute and no amount of internal meditation could seem to bring it down. He was also astutely aware of Aoi still looking at him, which made him very self-conscious about his body language. He couldn't allow her to sense even the slightest bit of weakness in him; it was for her own.

Was it?

Yusaku cleared his throat and nodded in the direction of the water. 'Hey, look... The further up we go, the more the water seems to shimmer.'

'Yeah...'

They rode in silence all the way to the top, where the ferris wheel stopped. Because it was a low time of the year and they were the only ones on it, the operator didn't stop the cabin at intervals. So the pair went straight to the top, and Aoi secretly hoped that the operator would be generous enough to keep them there for longer than she expected.

It was such a beautiful view.

From so high up, Aoi had the most spectacular view of Den City. And there were no walls or glass windows to keep her trapped. She felt the chill of the breeze, smelled the oddly pleasing scent of salt and grass in the air, and the rays of the sun warmed her face pleasantly. Even though she couldn't move outside of the passenger car, she had never felt so liberated before. Not even being Blue Angel could compare to the naked relief she was experiencing. No responsibilities, no expectations, no people to judge her every move.

No Akira.

Aoi's heart sank.

She missed her brother.

How was he doing? Did he miss her too? He must be worried sick. But surely he was taking care of himself... *Surely*, he wasn't letting their fight get to him. Akira was more than capable of taking care of himself. He didn't need her around to function. In fact, for most their lives, it was her who owed her life to him.

Was she doing him a great injustice by running away?

Before she could really think more of her predicament, Yusaku's words broke into her thoughts.

'Aoi... Thanks for helping me out at my place for the past few days.'

'Oh... Don't worry about it. I'm just trying to be a good guest.'

Yusaku nodded, but continued looking at her. Aoi tried to resume drinking in the sight around her, but found it impossible with her companion burning holes into her with his piercing gaze.

'Yusaku... Why are you looking at me?'

He frowned. 'Do you not want me to look at you?'

'It's not that. It's just that... The view is so nice. Wouldn't you rather be looking at it?'

At that, Yusaku strangely flinched before looking away yet again. But Aoi observed him, and could tell by the glassy sheen of his eyes that he was thinking about something. He wasn't at all taken in by the view. And perhaps, he was a little embarrassed that she had caught him staring at her so intently.

'Yusaku... What are you thinking about?'

After a long moment of silence, he finally replied, 'You.'

'Me?'

'Yeah.' he carded a hand through his hair. 'I'm trying to figure out how to help you.'

Aoi laughed. 'I just try to figure you out in general.'

'I'm not hard to read.'

'Mm... I think otherwise.' she teased. Then, her expression turned serious. 'I don't know how you feel about me.'

Yusaku rubbed his temples.

He should have known this was going to come up sooner or later. He had been dreading it all weekend. With a hard swallow, he gave her a tight reply, 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'We have sex all the time.' she said off-handedly, but Yusaku flinched at how casually the words rolled off her tongue. 'And yet, you haven't so much as kissed me this whole weekend.'

'I kissed you on Friday.'

Aoi scoffed, offended. Did he think she was stupid? Or did he seriously believe that his behaviour was normative and that he had no need to explain himself? 'It's Sunday. You haven't kissed me for *days*. If you're attracted to someone... You should want to kiss them all the time. But you don't. Why?'

Yusaku took a moment to ponder how he should answer that question. Truthfully, he hadn't made a move on her because he didn't want her to feel obligated to intimately engage with him in exchange for a place to stay. He also didn't consider that Aoi would even be in the mood to do anything, considering that she was going through so much with her brother. Nevertheless, the sexual tension between them was palpable. It was tortuous just sitting next to her, having so many feelings for her and yet being unable to touch her.

Still.

He decided that he wasn't going to act on those feelings out of courtesy. And also, because he didn't want to complicate what was already a rocky relationship between himself and Aoi. He made it clear time and time again: he wasn't interested in having a relationship with her (or anyone, for that matter). Consequently, he didn't want to let her in on the fact that he felt even the slightest bit of romantic love.

Naturally, he took this as another opportunity to push her away. Although in this instance, he didn't quite think it through. The results, he realized too late, were devastating.

Finally, Yusaku spoke, 'There was simply no desire to kiss you.'

'What do you mean?'

He shrugged. 'I didn't feel like having sex, so I didn't initiate any physical contact with you.'

Aoi's heart sank. Her skin turned cold and she was suddenly numb all over. Did he seriously just imply what she thought he did? In barely a whisper, she asked, 'Are you saying that you only touch me when you want to have sex?'

'Of course. Why else would I touch you in the first place?'

'*Yusaku*.' her tone was hard, but broken. The syllables of his name didn't quite mesh together. They were breathy and jagged, like she was spitting out shards of glass. It was clear that it was paining her to talk to him right now. She opened her mouth as though she were about to say something else, but promptly snapped it back shut and turned away from him. She propped her arms on top of the ledge of the passenger cart and laid her chin on top of folded hands, which were shaking with emotion. Her whole body felt like it was shutting down, but she was desperately trying to calm down. At the very least, she knew that she couldn't accomplish that while facing him. So she stared into the endless water below, trying to distract herself with how beautiful it looked as it seemed to transition seamlessly into the sky.

The tears were starting to sting anyway. Aoi bit her lip to fight them back.

She was, miraculously, successful at remaining composed.

Or she was too tired to exert more effort in showcasing how upset she was.

Yusaku suddenly felt cold all over, now very aware that he had said something terribly wrong. He couldn't pinpoint exactly why what he said was particularly upsetting, but he could tell from Aoi's reaction that he had gone too far this time. Rather, that he had potentially finally achieved his

goal of pushing her away to the point of no return, but he was rapidly regretting that accomplishment.

'Aoi.' Yusaku tried calling out as he slid over to be next to her. 'Hey...' he instinctively laid a hand on her knee, but felt her stiffen at his touch. That confused him. She had never done that before. 'Aoi-'

'Don't touch me.'

Obediently, Yusaku withdrew his hand, but not without shooting her a bewildered stare. Of course, in her position, she couldn't see that. But his confusion persisted, along with a sense of dread that was indicative of rising guilt. 'Did I say something wrong?'

Aoi almost jolted from a spike of murderous intent: should she punch him in the throat or throw him off the cabin? How dense could he be? He had essentially just reduced her to his fuck toy right to her face, and now he was asking if he had something problematic? Wasn't he supposed to be some genius student? Well, he was the dumbest bastard she had ever met in her life.

However, she replied cooly, 'No.'

'Then why are you acting all weird?'

'I'm not acting weird.'

'But you've never...' he cleared his throat. 'You've never disliked it when I've touched you.'

'Because I didn't think that you thought I was such a *whore*.'

Yusaku was taken aback by that. He recoiled, as if struck by her words. And, somewhere in his heart, was a sharp fragment of offence that was spinning around, ripping at the usually impenetrable defense of his ego. 'Where the *fuck* did you get that?' he snapped, irritated. 'I *don't* think you're like that at all.'

Blindly motivated by anger, Aoi sat up straight and twisted herself to look at him. Her brows were knit together furiously and her eyes were so fiery, he thought that maybe she was going to reach out and choke him. Strangely enough, he wasn't intimidated. She had pissed him off too; accusing him of thinking so lowly of her. Did she serious think he was that small of a man? Well, he was determined to expose the ludicrousness of her accusation.

'You *just* told me that you don't want to touch me unless you want to have sex.' she reminded him. 'You don't care about me unless you need to get your dick wet. And even then, when we fuck, you only care about getting off.'

'You sound insane right now.' he purposely attacked her, fuming inside from her crude words. He knew that she was choosing her venomous vocabulary to hurt him - and whether he could admit it or not, it was working. 'What are you talking about? I let you stay at my place, I get you clothes... I do what I can. The fact that I haven't made a move on you should show you just how much I care about you!'

'*No*, it doesn't.' her tone was biting. 'It just proves to me that you're detached!'

'*Of course* I'm detached. I've been *telling* you that I have no romantic interest in you.'

'You certainly fooled me, in the way you held me, kissed me-' she turned her head away from him again, unable to finish her thoughts. He was pissing her off. She wanted nothing more than to just get off this *stupid* ride already, to get away from this heartless man who she was *stupidly* in love with.

Stupid. So stupid. How could she be so stupid?

'Don't put the blame on me.' Yusaku yanked her by the arm, pulling her unnecessarily up close to him to the point where a slight nod of his chin could brush their lips against each other. 'I told you.' he reminded her again, his hot breath fanning her face. 'I've already told you that I will never love

you. Nothing will change that. You're a beautiful woman. I'm physically attracted to you. We have sex. There's nothing more to us than that. What is it going to take for you to stop trying already?'

Aoi didn't reply. It was taking all of her strength to just meeting his eyes while he trampled on her feelings.

'You're not a special woman to me.' he continued. 'You're just *a* woman. Just like I'm just a man to you. And that's how it should be.'

'But you're not just any man to me. I have feelings for you. I want to kiss you all the time.' she admitted sadly. 'Because I like you. And I know that I told you that I don't need you to like me back, but I thought that you somehow did... Because I didn't think that you would be so passionate with me unless you had some feelings for me.'

Yusaku's heart wavered, but he resolved to end this *now*. 'That passion you felt... It wasn't love.'

'Then show me.' she pleaded, astute to how pathetic she was being but no longer caring. 'Show me how you kiss the girls you like.'

But you already know, he thought ironically, 'Aoi... That's...'

'Please.' her voice was barely a whisper. 'I want to know the difference. I want to know how you treat someone you like.'

Yusaku knew that he should have refused.

For some reason, he didn't.

He was aching to kiss her for so long now, that when it came down to this moment, he couldn't listen to his logical self.

Yusaku shamelessly gave in to his irrational heart.

He brushed his lips against hers once, twice, then pressed his mouth gently against hers. His lips massaged hers, prying her mouth open with tantalizing

slowness. His heart was racing faster than it ever had before, and Aoi's sweet, comforting, lavender scent was stronger today - or perhaps he was just inhaling it more consciously now. She whined, and he took that as consent to dip his tongue into her. That was when all his self-control fell into the ocean below them; her flavour was the most potent aphrodisiac. He depend the kiss, weighing on her with almost enough force to hurt her. But she didn't seem to mind. Aoi instinctively wrapped her arms around his neck and fought the threat of happy tears.

He was so loving. So tender, considerate, and loving. She could feel the emotion in his movements, and the raw desire that he could only feel for the person who could hold his heart. And Aoi realized with debilitating pain that he never kissed her with this much care. All the confusion in her heart before about whether or not Yusaku cared about her... It was all gone now.

Fujiki Yusaku-kun...

This was what his love felt like.

But it wasn't meant for her.

Hard, deep, punishing kisses were meant for her. The most passionate he's ever been with her was when he was riding her, or she was riding him, or something else erotically inclined. She couldn't recall a time when he just *kissed* her, without the need to take it further. Maybe when she first ran to him after she escaped from her brother, but that may have just been out of pity.

And when she and Yusaku did go all the way, even if he was kind and considerate of her consent, she realized that it was only natural for him to be that way. Not out of love or because she was special to him, but because that was just the type of person he was - and he probably wanted to treat her properly to continue having sex with her.

Fujiki Yusaku-kun...

Yusaku moaned into the kiss, breaking Aoi out of her thoughts and clearly showcasing how much he was enjoying tasting her. His hands, as if of their own accord, found their way to her waist and pulled her tightly to him. Their bodies were pressed so closely together that one would have thought they were trying to melt into each other. From so close, they could feel every contour of each other's shapes. Aoi's heart wavered at how familiar his body felt. The memory of him was burned to her mind forever. And even though they weren't clawing at each other, there was something passionately romantic about kissing him with the knowledge that they were suspended above everybody else, up in the sky where no one could see them.

Fujiki Yusaku-kun...

He withdrew his lips from hers to gaze into her eyes. They were so full of emotion. He couldn't decipher what she was feeling. A hand left her waist to cup her face; his thumb grazed her swollen lips and she inhaled sharply at the contact. He didn't speak, but the tenderness in his touch revealed volumes about how he felt in that moment. In that moment, he felt completely vulnerable. He had only kissed her like that in fantasies, and to finally show her just how softly he wanted to brush his lips against felt like he was confessing to a grave sin. He was utterly convinced that she had worked it out that he was irrevocably in love with her, and that any denial was just his way of avoiding having to confront that which he locked deep inside his heart.

She *had* to know. It was so obvious.

'Yeah...' she broke the silence, tilting her head away to shrug him off. Her hands folded in her lap and her eyes were downcast. She could feel Yusaku's soft eyes on her, but she couldn't find the courage to look at him. Instead, she whispered, 'You definitely don't kiss me like that.'

'Aoi...'

'Thank you for showing me the difference.' she smiled brightly. She was a master at concealing her breaking heart. Had Yusaku not known better, he

would have completely bought that she was just fine. 'Now I know the difference between me and a special woman.'

Hey guys! Thank you so much for reading and reviewing this story. Your support is really uplifting. I'm a little busy right now with exams coming up, but I wanted to get this chapter out. Apologies if it feels rushed! If it does, please let me know so I can improve for next time.

Also, **Yujo0147** suggested an idea that I think is fantastic. Even though it would take a longer time for me to finish this story, I would love to do it! What do you guys think of having separate routes for this story? Specifically, having a bad route, good route, true route, etcetera? Please let me know though messaging or somewhere in your review (if you were gonna leave one - please do!) if you like this idea. I honestly am so excited about it, and thank you so much to **Yujo0147** for suggesting it! And thanks for your continued support, you are always so encouraging to me!

If you have an account, I have already responded to you through private messaging. Otherwise, let me respond to you in this note!

Rose, thank you so much for your review! Don't worry, I don't plan to make the true ending of this a bad one! There will definitely be lots of love. They just have to get through these miscommunication problems first.

OWO, thanks for reviewing again! I missed reading your thoughts. Hope that the chapters were enjoyable for you. Thanks a lot for liking the pacing. I try to take things slow so that nothing feels rushed. And yes, there will definitely be more Akira x Emma scenes! Their relationship will be important in this story.

Guest, thank you so much for your encouraging your words! It was so uplifting to read your review, thank you. Kusanagi, Ai, and Akira will have their reactions in the next chapters, especially since Kusanagi will ask Yusaku about how it went. The problem I see with Yusaku is that with every inch he opens of himself comes a million daggers. And I think it's just a

question of how far is he going to push Aoi and if he soon realizes that she's not going to hurt him in the way that he thinks.

13. Honest Night

The descent to the ground was marred with silence.

Aoi didn't even so much as look at Yusaku again. The latter, as well, kept his eyes glued to the ground below, unwilling to address the tension between himself and his companion. The ride was operating painfully slow. Yusaku seriously considered just jumping out. Breaking some bones when he hit the ground felt like a better alternative than sitting so close to Aoi when he knew that all she wanted to do was slap him. He knew that he deserved it, but he was also convinced that there was no other way for him to protect them from inevitable pain.

When they reached the ground and stepped out, neither had to consult the other to know that they were headed out of the park now. After all, they had only come for the ferris wheel. There was no reason to stay now that that was done. Well, and also, that there was no way they could continue being in each other's presence with how awkward it was between them.

They finally left the vicinity.

The whole walk out must have been ten minutes at most, but it felt like a century.

'I'm just going to get my uniform from your place.' Aoi had the courage to be the first to break the silence.

Yusaku nodded. The implication wasn't lost on him: Aoi intended to return home.

His demeanour was calm throughout the entire journey back home, but he was screaming internally. *Shit.* Shit, shit, *shit*! This was it. This was finally it. Aoi was about to kick him to the curb and abandon-

Abandon?

How could she abandon him when they were never together?

Yusaku knew that he was being ridiculous, but his chest felt heavy with weight of rejection. Even though he was the one who was being difficult, it felt like her decision to return him was the same as giving up on him; which was untrue, considering Yusaku was actively trying to make her feel like shit for wanting to get close to him. So then, why was he feeling incredibly disappointed in her? Like she had just turned her back on a responsibility, even though he was never her obligation to begin with?

Yusaku wrestled with this feelings the whole back to his building, up the stairs, into his room; he couldn't figure himself out, so how could he expect Aoi to do that for him?

'Excuse me.' Aoi said curtly as she walked in front of him to get her school uniform from the dryer. Yusaku subconsciously burned holes into the back of her head with his intense gaze. He was trying to figure out the best way out of this situation. He couldn't take his words back; he definitely didn't want Aoi to continue vying for his attention when she deserved to go find someone else. But he also most certainly didn't want her to leave him yet.

But how could she go find who she deserved if she was still tied to him?

Yusaku's heart sank - the only thing to do, he realized, was to just let this happen.

'Take the clothes too.' he said with faux off-handedness, motioning to the plastic bag with the apparel he had bought for her. 'They're for you anyway.'

'Keep them here.' Aoi replied cooly after she folded her uniform. 'For the other girls you bring home.'

Yusaku's jaw tightened.

'There won't be any other girls.' he whispered just loudly enough so she could hear.

'I don't care.' she lied, her voice shaking. Her fingers were trembling, struggling to fold her clothes properly. Her body suddenly felt numb. She

couldn't feel her limbs, nor could she feel the ground beneath her. It didn't even feel like she was truly there; like she was above, floating, watching; a spectator to her own humiliation.

Unable to do anything to change the situation.

Lost in her thoughts, she failed to hear his footsteps drawing closer. It was only when he settled behind her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her tightly to him that she remembered where she was. They were pressed against each other, back to chest. Emotion debilitated her as she tried to imprint the warmth of his body to the back of her mind, so that she could never forget it. What was he doing? Why was he doing this? He's so confusing, but Aoi doesn't care. She's just relieved that he's being tender with her again.

She's never as happy as when he's this kind to her.

She hates that she's so dependent on his affection.

I wish I never met you, she thought bitterly.

'Goodbye hug? Is that what this is?' she laughed hollowly, tears welling up in her eyes. She refused to let them fall. Despite the resentment she felt towards him, any negative emotions she had dissipated with his embrace. She hated how weak in the knees she got for him. Even just an inch of affection from him made her feel so incredibly happy.

This wasn't sustainable.

'Yusaku? What are you doing?'

Yusaku didn't respond.

Instead, he gently turned her around by the waist and descended upon her with a soft kiss. Rather than push him away, Aoi wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to him. He understood and dipped his tongue into her, pushing her down on the bed gently with his weight. Aoi

gasped as she fell on the mattress. Her partner withdrew his lips from hers, and she whimpered with disappointment. Her eyes met his, confused and needy. He stared right back at her, but with a look that she couldn't quite figure out. There was some sadness and hesitancy, but also a hidden sentiment that was unrecognizable to Aoi. What was it? Why couldn't she put her finger on it?

Because she could never believe that Yusaku loved her.

'Can I make love to you?' he asked in barely a whisper.

Aoi couldn't control the words that left her, 'Yes.'

And somehow, they found themselves mostly bare again, kissing and reaching for each other desperately like the world was going to end tomorrow. The awkwardness and dark tension of being together was lost in this scenario, as if their shared intimacy was the most natural interaction for them. Perhaps it was because it was when they were both honest with each other, whereas Yusaku was dishonest in every other circumstance. But all of Aoi was right under his touch - and *only* his touch - he found it impossible to maintain the facade that she meant absolutely nothing to him.

'Do you like my body?' Aoi asked innocently. She sat up on her knees, still in her underwear. Yusaku was reclined against his headboard, completely undressed and impatient for her to come to him. He felt like both a prideful king and a helpless prisoner in her presence. 'Yusaku... Do you like my body?'

'Of course.' he answered honestly.

'Mm...' Aoi hummed as she twirled her fingers around the straps of her underwear. She lifted them up slightly, exposing more of the skin of her hips. Subconsciously, he licked hips lips as his gaze lowered to where she was teasing herself, and he cursed under his breath. His throat was scratchy and cold from his uneven, sharp inhales. He swore that if he didn't reach out and at the very least kiss her that he would pass out from the strain of remaining composed. 'What do you like about my body?'

That snapped him somewhat out of his stupor. He frowned at her, blushing with humiliation, and said defensively, 'That's a stupid question.'

'Is it? Because I don't know. So, tell me...' she let go of the straps to palm up her flat stomach and stopped right under the wire of her bra. 'Is this what you like?'

Yusaku grit his teeth.

'Or maybe...' she dared to go up and over the swell of her breasts, pushing them slightly together so that they were beyond appetizing to her lover. 'You like these?'

Yusaku looked away. His heart was beating thunderously against his chest. There was no way he could continue watching her and not be tempted to have his way with her. But Aoi wasn't going to let him go so easily. She crawled towards him on all fours until her palms were on top of his thighs. Still, he refused to meet her eyes. Not one to take defeat well, Aoi gave him a chaste peck on the lips. Surprisingly, he kissed her back. Aoi took her chance and licked his bottom lip, prying his mouth open and slipping her tongue into it. It was game over after that: Yusaku had lost all self-control. He kissed her wantonly, leaning into her and cupping her face as if trying to pull her closer.

'Mm...' she moaned into their kiss. She then gently took hold of one of his hands from her face and guided it down, underneath her panties so that he could feel her slit. As a result, he jerked away from their kiss and shot her an almost frightened look, like he was unsure of what to do. 'Shh...' she hummed lovingly into his ear before trailing open-mouthed kisses along his jawline. She then guided his fingers right to the tight ring of her entrance, where he prodded her before ultimately slipping two fingers inside of her. He bit his lip and shut his eyes. She was so hot, tight, and *wet* for him. It was an arduous task to keep himself sane for she felt like heaven. 'A-Ah, Yusaku... Yusaku...'

'I like all of you.' he corrected, panting heavily. He started pumping his fingers in and out of her slowly, sensually, while his other hand settled

behind her waist, pulling her to him. He pressed the side of his face against her collarbone and kissed her skin. 'There's not an inch of you that I don't like.' he confessed before retrieving his fingers. He sucked them clean before unhooking her bra from her back. Aoi slid that article of clothing from her body and discarded it. His mouth was practically salivating at the sight in front of him.

'Yusaku?'

'You're perfect.' he said before giving her a crushing kiss. She yelped and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly. Her arms were still folded over her chest and there was no way she could them with him pressing her up against him with such force - not that she minded. She loved it whenever he was passionate in his affection for her. He wasn't scaring her off. Rather, she returned the erotic maneuvers of his tongue with her own eager desire. He overpowered her; it was evident that his intention was to dominate her this time.

That was something he had never really done before; was that his version of making love? Even though his kisses were gentle, was his intention to overpower her?

The truth that even Aoi could sense was that she always had the true grip on power between them - at least in a sexual context. Everything Yusaku did when they were like this revolved around her reactions to him. If she even showed the slightest bit of discomfort, he wasn't going to force himself onto her. Even during moments when he was desperate to thrust into her with abandon, he never gave in to his impulses without ensuring that it was exactly what Aoi wanted.

Often, he never even touched her without asking.

His caring nature warmed Aoi's heart, but she wasn't naive enough to believe that she was a special girl. It was probably just how Yusaku was to all the women he was involved with... Which was perhaps why he was so irresistibly charming.

'I'm sorry.' Yusaku huffed when their mouths left each other. 'That I don't tell you how beautiful you are. But you really are so...' his hands settled on either side of her hips and he distanced himself a bit from her so that he could have a good view of her body. With the space between them, Aoi was comfortable exposing her entire torso to him. She watched with some humiliation when his gaze immediately darted to her breasts. Unceremoniously, he kneaded them and she bit her lip to prevent herself from crying out. 'So *beautiful*.'

'Ah, ah, Yusaku...' she almost sobbed with need. 'Please hurry...'

'Hurry with what?' he feigned ignorance, latching an open mouth against the curve of her neck and sucking lazily. *Damn*, she tasted so good. So good and sweet and warm... He shut his eyes and clenched his teeth.

If only he was good enough for her.

If only they could be together.

If only he had the courage to forgive himself.

'Please...' Aoi was breathing hard. 'Don't make me wait anymore... I want you inside of me...'

Yusaku didn't need to be told twice. He raised his head and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. 'Turn around.' he suggested in a voice that was huskier than his normal tone. 'I want to be able to touch all of you.'

With a blush, Aoi did as she was told. She turned her back to him and got on all fours. He placed his hands on her hips. She was expecting him to just enter her after that, but instead, she felt his hot mouth trailing slick kisses from the back of her neck down to the hollow of her spine, where he raked his teeth and groaned. Aoi had never heard him make a sexier noise. He was teasing her with deliberate slowness even though it was killing them both.

But he decided that the results were worth it.

Aoi yelped and fisted the sheets. Her elbows gave out and her torso was slumped on the mattress. If not for Yusaku holding her by the hips, she'd be laying completely flat. All her muscle control had left her. She was now a trembling, limp mess. She could feel how wet she was between her legs, her juices running down her thighs at this point. Every nerve in her body was heightened to its most sensitive state and she couldn't even think straight. Her mouth was open and she was panting; a massive turn-on to the man who was satisfying her. Yusaku smirked lopsidedly, pleased with his handiwork. He sat up and admired the fruit of his patience.

'You're so wet, Aoi...' he murmured, sliding his length against her slick arousal. 'Do you want me that badly?'

'*Yes*.' she responded without hesitation. She was squirming around, trying to get him to slide into her, but all she really accomplished was further exciting him. He was now aching, throbbing with desire. And she could feel him too, begging at her entrance. 'Please just do it.' she squeaked. 'I can't... I can't wait any more...'

"Tell me, baby, tell me.' he breathed, his thighs trembling with dwindling self-control. 'Tell me what you want, tell me and I'll give you anything.'

'I can't have what I want.' she looked over her shoulder to meet his gaze with her sad eyes. 'Because I want *you*.'

Yusaku's heart sank.

'What about you?' she whispered. 'What do you want?'

Ignoring her question momentarily, he slid into her without warning. But Aoi felt no pain whatsoever; rather, she was finally satisfied with him inside of her. Yusaku didn't ease into it. His rhythm was fast and hard, deep and gratuitous. Aoi moaned loudly, screaming the uncoordinated syllables of her lover's name every so often when he slid against the best, most pleasurable parts of her. Yusaku licked his lips when he saw a beautifully erotic smile on her face; the best reward he could be given.

Without missing a beat, he bent over to hook an arm around her waist, pulling her up to him so that they were both kneeling. He pressed his mouth against her ear and hissed out a confession, 'I want you, Aoi. But the way you make me feel is exactly what I fear most.'

'I love you.' she responded nonsensically, unable to properly formulate thoughts in this intensely pleasurable situation. 'Yusaku... I... I-!'

'Tell me, my beautiful baby.' he gave the side of her face a languid lick. 'Tell me that you like me, that you like what I do to you...'

'I like it!' she admitted, squirming in his strong arms. Her body was shaking uncontrollably and she felt weak from pleasure. 'I like it, I like it, I-'

'You're *mine*, Aoi.' he yanked her by the throat so that she was forced to face him. He met the desperate desire in her glassy, hazel eyes, and the pleasure etched into her trembling features excited him further. She looked so utterly submissive to him that feelings of possession were humming in his veins. 'You're mine.'

Aoi panted heavily.

'You're *mine*.' he whispered into her ear in an endless loop, slowing his thrusts but deepening them. She moaned loudly, uncontrollably, at the change of pace. Her hips gyrated against him, encouraging his rhythm with her own sensual expression. He made it a point to graze her womb every time he dipped his length inside of her, earning a high-pitched whine from her every time he did so. It was a little painful for him, which meant that it was definitely painful for her; but she didn't seem to end. In fact, she was more than encouraging of him.

'My beautiful baby...'

'I want you.' she whispered so softly, he thought that she was uttering a secret. 'I want you deeper inside of me.'

'Deeper?' he placed his hands on her hips to pull her up against him, trying to fulfill her wish to take him in as deeply as she could, tearing a yelp from Aoi. Though he couldn't bury himself fully inside of her, his tip was already pressing against her end and he wasn't about to force more of himself into her. That, he decided, was simply cruel. No matter how much Aoi said that she wanted it, he couldn't bring himself to do that to her physical body. 'Baby, you can't take me any deeper.' he warned as he gave her a tender kiss on the cheek.

'Then... I want it harder.' she insisted in between pants. She reached over her shoulder to caress Yusaku's jawline. 'I want it hotter... I want it faster... I want you to give it to me so good that you're all I can think about for days afterwards when I'm alone and horny in my bed.'

Her bold words, combined with the wet sounds of their lovemaking each time he thrust into her, excited Yusaku further. His vision was blurring and the knot at his abdomen was tightening, coiling until it was physically paining him not to cum. Still, he fought back the urge to do so - he wouldn't do it, not until he was sure that Aoi was completely satisfied. In the pursuit of her climax, he groped a breast with one hand while the other dipped lower to draw hard circles on her clit. She cried out and he raked his teeth along the curve of her neck. 'I love the sounds you make.' he spoke into her skin.

'I-Is that...' Aoi reached behind and dug her nails into his thighs. 'Is that all you love about me?'

'I love how you hold me at night.' he almost choked, overcome with emotion. When he spoke once more, he did so after drawing out a particularly long moan from Aoi. 'I love... I love everything about you.'

Aoi turned her head so that she was facing him. Her eyes met his and she had the courage to ask, 'Then why can't you love *me*?'

'But I do. I love you.' he admitted, pressing his mouth onto hers without kissing her yet. 'I love you more than anyone,' he finished, and his tongue licked at her bottom lip. He didn't have the concentration to properly kiss

her, but she quickly fixed that. She met his tongue with her own and they moaned into their makeshift kiss. But with all the attention he was giving her, it didn't take long after that for her to writhe in his arms, under the influence of the most intense orgasm she's ever had. She moaned his name over and over, and the encouragement pushed him to keep thrusting in and out of her, not once letting up even as her spasms subsided. He could feel her walls pulsating with release, but he refused to give in to his own needs. He resolved to give her the most pleasing experience of her life.

As soon as her climax ended, Yusaku's persistent lovemaking caused another fiery buildup of pressure in her abdomen. She was squeezing him again, even more so tightly than before, until she came apart and pushed against his thighs with her hands. Yusaku took this as a sign that she wanted him to stop, so he halted his actions abruptly, only for her to yell at him to keep going until she could no longer feel her bones. He must have lost his mind after that, because he wordlessly began a rhythm that was nothing less than punishing.

Aoi, strangely, was thoroughly enjoying her submissive position even though she liked being in control. She was feeling an intense combination of pain and pleasure, and those two were positively correlated to each other in this moment. The more pain she felt, the higher the high of her ecstasy. Her insides felt raw from all the friction, but she was wetter than she ever thought she could be. With all the attention her lover was giving her, she screamed for the third time that afternoon, her limbs effectively turning into jelly. No longer having the strength to keep herself on her knees, she slumped forwards. Yusaku supported her weight by the hips, but her arms and face were pressed up against the mattress. Her motionlessness, however, was not a result of her lack of interest or desire, but by her decision to be submissive.

She wanted to believe that he loved her.

Aoi couldn't fathom how anything but love could be responsible for his fire.

But after being burned by him so many times, she felt nothing after his apparent confession.

She didn't even believe him.

But she wanted to enjoy this moment, to trick herself into thinking that it was real.

With a whimper, Yusaku finally came inside of her, the muscles of his back and arms straining with unbelievably pleasurable release. He bucked into her as he rode out his orgasm, his movements turning off-rhythm. Regardless, Aoi gasped sharply with each deep stroke he made until he thought that maybe she was crying. Worried, he wrapped his arms around her waist and turned her slightly so that her whole body was tilted slightly to him. They made eye contact and his breath caught in his throat.

Aoi wasn't upset at all, it seemed. Dare he assume that she even looked happy? Satisfied? Whatever it was, she was content. Her lips were settled into a pretty smile and her eyes were playful. She stared back at him with triumph reflected in glassy, hazel orbs and he realized the error of what he had done; he had inadvertently told her that he loved her, and that same love was evident in the way he had pleasured her today.

Yet, it was a mistake that Yusaku wanted to bask in for a while longer.

He kissed her fully on the mouth. She moaned into the kiss, and he continued to ride her until he went soft. When he was spent, he pulled out of her slowly as to not hurt her, but she still squeaked when he left her. He broke their kiss to drag his swollen lips down her neck, past her collarbone, to right between her breasts where he planted open-mouthed licks on her warm skin.

She shifted on the bed so that her back was completely flat against it. Yusaku adjusted his legs so that she could move around better, and when she settled into her position, he gave her a quick kiss on the mouth before sitting up on his heels. Heavy eyelids shut over weary, green eyes. He had

to take a few breaths to normalize his state of mind. He felt like he was about to pass out any second now.

'Yusaku... What are you doing?'

'I'm trying to not die.' he responded dryly. 'You've exhausted me.'

'Hehe...' she giggled sweetly, and he swore that the sound of her laughter was almost enough to motivate him to go for another round. When he finally caught his breath, he gazed down at his lover. She was draped lazily over the sheets. Her hair, damp with sweat, was a complete mess but she still looked stunning. She had a hand up to her face, where her fingers settled almost provocatively on her lips, while her other arm was folded over her stomach. 'Do you like what you see?'

Yusaku said nothing, but his intense eyes burned into hers.

'Do you want to see what you've done to me?' Aoi continued. Without waiting for his answer, she folded her legs and spread them. Yusaku gave no reaction. He was unusually silent, watching her intently while taking no initiative to touch her. It should have been a mortifying experience to be observed by an inactive onlooker, but Aoi was confident. She never once broke eye contact with him, not even when she removed her arm from her stomach to reach down and part her intimate folds with her fingers.

Yusaku's breathing involuntarily shallowed.

Try as he might to remain composed, his calm demeanour dissolved quickly as he watched his own semen oozing out of her. He should have been freaking out: What if Aoi got pregnant? What if she thought that he was disgusting? What if she hated him? Strangely enough, those thoughts have crossed him, but he couldn't find it in himself to panic and ruin the moment. Rather, at this point in time, he felt incredibly close to her. Their connection was transcending the physical, and he felt as if he had truly melted with her so that they could never truly separate ever again.

He leaned over so that he was on top of her, kissing her deeply. She returned his affection with passion. Her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer until their bodies were pressed up against each other. Slowly, and without breaking the kiss, Yusaku trailed one hand down her ribs, past her hips, hovering right over where he had just cum inside of her. He couldn't get himself to touch her there again. What if she thought he was a pervert? He had already finished, and she was clearly tired, more so than himself. Then again, he was completely spent too - so why *did* he want to do more?

His anxiety was increasing, but Aoi assured him that there was nothing to be nervous about.

'I want you.' she pulled back from their lip locking to gaze into his warm eyes. 'What you want to do to me... I want it too, as long as it's you.'

Dumbfounded, Yusaku said nothing. But he continued to lock eyes with her, even as he dipped a long finger into her and she arched at the sensation, letting out a small whimper. In her current state, her body was overly sensitive to any sort of stimulation. He watched as her brows scrunched together and her mouth contorted as she tried to say his name, but the syllables came out in broken, choked moans. Yusaku felt her tighten around him and he, too, could feel himself hardening again, his uncontrolled feelings for her turning him uncharacteristically needy. He buried his face into her neck and grinded against her, clenching his teeth as he desperately tried not to lose it then and there.

But Aoi unhooked an arm from around him to reach down and grab his wrist, halting his movements. Disappointed, but frightened to death of hurting her, he withdraw his finger from her immediately. Worried, he snapped his head back up to look at her properly. His expression was one that was etched with concern.

'I'm sorry.' he started. 'Aoi, I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you? I-'

'Shh...' Aoi calmly hushed him, dragging his hand up to her mouth and sucking on his wet digit, tasting what they were together. He growled at the

spectacle in front of him. It finally dawned on him that Aoi was doing this on purpose; she knew exactly how to push his buttons to get what she wanted. Well, he was determined to do just that. Yet somehow, he was confident that they were both after the same thing; evidence of a bond that was greater than friendship, and that was able to transcend all human boundaries.

'You drive me crazy.' Yusaku hissed, his piercing, emerald gaze scalding on her. 'You feel *so good* around me...'

Aoi felt like she was burning from the inside out. Though she sensed the danger in continuing to dig further into this pocket in reality wherein they could be damagingly honest with each other, she couldn't tear herself away from it. Like a moth to a flame, she was happy to dance around the threat of inevitable rejection for as long as she could enjoy the burn of his volatile, but genuine, love.

'Yusaku... I want to be on top.'

So they maneuvered themselves so that he was laying on his back, and Aoi was straddling him on her knees. She lowered herself to take him inside of her, and Yusaku involuntarily threw his head back and sighed. He looked at his lover, who was biting her lip and had her eyes screwed shut. He asked her if it hurt, but she flashed him a smile and shook her head. Once he was mostly engulfed by her warmth and his tip met her womb, she rocked back and forth, moving him in a way that was arousingly foreign. His hands squeezed her on either side of her hips to try and control his reactions, but a whine escaped him.

Aoi palmed his chest and began sliding up and down his shaft. She did this slowly, almost agonizingly so, but the pleasure she felt between her legs radiated to her chest this way. She wanted to enjoy him selfishly, to love him in both the satisfying physical and the invisible gentleness of emotional desire. The sounds she made this time were higher in time, and she often inhaled sharply - not because she was out of breath, but because she was overcome with sentimentality. Before they woke up from this dream and

resumed to honour the distance that Yusaku insisted on, she was intent on savouring the connection they had in this moment.

It wasn't just Aoi who felt this way.

'I love you.' Yusaku whispered under his breath, more for himself than for her.

She didn't hear him.

Aoi twitched suddenly, and she collapsed on him before tightening around him. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her on the mouth, whispering now and again how beautiful she was as he spilled his seed into her. Aoi rode out her orgasm, her movements slowing and turning off-rhythm as the last of her tremors ended. When Yusaku was sure that she was satisfied, he pulled out of her and pulled her to him. Without another word, they laid side by side, locking eyes and silent confessions. They stayed comfortably in each other's arms as heavy sleep whisked them away from consciousness.

Hey guys! Thank you so much for the amazing feedback last chapter. I was overwhelmed. I do have exams, but I've studied efficiently so that I'm able to publish this chapter. I didn't know how to properly thank you all for the encouragement I received, so I thought that the best way to do so was to quickly update this story. I hope to read what you guys think of this chapter!

Thank you guys again so much, especially for the support from last chapter. I still can't fully believe it. From the reviews, to the messages, to the positive interest in having different routes for this story: thank you so much. I was truly honoured and I appreciate every single one of you who took the time to give me feedback.

If you have an account, I have privately messaged you! Otherwise, I respond to you below.

Yujo0147, thanks so much for your continued encouragement! And especially for suggesting that this story take different routes. As of now, I'm only planning for there to be one bad route, one good route, and one true route! And thank you for wishing me well on my exams!

Aniki, so the way it will work is that at some point in the story, the routes will diverge. So there will come a point where a character has to make a decision and that will determine what happens. It can lead to an ending, or to continuing the story. And yes, I will be labeling which chapters are meant for the bad route, good route, true route, etcetera! Thank you so much for your support and for wishing me well on my exams!

Guest, thank you so much for your positive reaction to my work! It means a lot and don't worry; there will still be many more chapters, especially with the route modification!

Guest, the sex scenes will incorporate more of that stuff in the future, but it will happen later as it will serve a psychological purpose!

Guest, haha, well a makeout fest can be a nice date too! That is an interesting idea for a route and I will definitely consider it. If I use it, I will credit you! Thank you so much!

Guest, they are sour as of now because Yusaku is having a hard time opening up. That will change as the story progresses!

14. Chilly Morning

When Aoi awoke in the morning, she seriously wondered if her limbs had liquified overnight and melted onto the bedsheets. She rubbed her eyes and was appalled at how heavy her arms felt. Just lifting them was near-impossible task. Her bones felt as dense as lead, creaking as she twisted them here and there. Oh, and the soreness that struck her abdomen like a bolt of lightning when she sat up; that was nothing less than excruciatingly painful. She winced at the sensation.

She forced herself into a sitting position. Her hands fisted the sheets and wrapped them loosely around her body. Then, she searched the room for her lover. She didn't have to look long. The second she raised her head, she found him sitting right in front of her, already dressed in his school uniform, on the foot of the bed. He met her with a chilly gaze. Aoi shivered. His eyes were so cold, like stones on the beach after a particularly long, lonely night with no stars.

'Good morning.' she laughed uncomfortably, hoping to ease the tension. 'Did you sleep well?'

Yusaku didn't respond to her question. Instead, he raised a box to the front of his face, shaking it slightly to call her attention to it. Aoi squinted, but she couldn't read what it said. Before she could ask, he slid the package to her. Obediently, she took it in her hands and read the fine print.

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE - PLAN B

'You don't have to take it.' Yusaku spoke. 'Ultimately, it's your choice. However, I strongly recommend that you do if you don't want to risk pregnancy.'

Aoi averted her gaze. It was so awkward to talk about this.

But Yusaku wasn't going to allow her to ignore him, especially not when the topic was this grave. He slid a long finger under her chin and tilted her face so that they were looking right into each other's eyes. Uncertain, worried

hazel met ice-emerald. 'Do you understand?' he pressed, trying to get her to truly comprehend the gravity of the situation through his chilly tone. 'Do you know what could happen if you don't take this?' he almost demanded, like he was an officer in an interrogation room drilling her for a crime she wasn't aware she committed.

Even though Aoi completely understood that it was unreasonable to have a child at their age, the callous manner by which Yusaku was addressing this issue was hurting her. There was no empathy in his voice. He was calculating and detached. In fact, the way he phrased it seemed to absolve him of any involvement. He told her that it was her choice, as if he had no say in the matter, as if he wasn't the one who went out of his way to purchase this contraception in the first place. His opinion on the matter was crystal - he just wanted Aoi to go along with it. Of course, she didn't want to be pregnant anyway. But she hated that even in this circumstance, it felt like Yusaku was rejecting her. Even though she knew better, that he was right - he still managed to make her feel a metaphorical kick to the curb.

'I'll take it.' Aoi forced a small smile. 'I promise.'

Yusaku nodded. Relief washed over him. He tried to hide it, but she saw the happy gleam in his eyes. Of course, she knew he would be relieved because she was on board with using some form of birth control. However, she also took his reaction as reassurance that he didn't have to be saddled with the crushing weight of a biological connection to her. The pain she felt from that was tenfold. 'Do you need some water?'

'Yes, please.'

Yusaku stood up and fetched her a full glass. He sat down in front of her yet again, watching intently as she opened the box, took the small pill out of it and into her mouth, until finally washing it down with the drink. Yusaku felt a great weight lifted off of his shoulders when she did that. He couldn't hide solace in his eyes, and Aoi was quick to notice it. That *stung*. But she pretended not to notice and cleared her throat, 'I'm going to head to school. You should go soon as well, if you don't want to be late.'

'Yeah.'

But he didn't move. He remained where he was, staring at her with no decipherable emotion, making her feel small and unworthy and *unloved*.

Aoi broke the silence. 'Is there something else?'

'I want to forget everything that happened between us yesterday.' Yusaku said sternly. 'Can you do me a favour and forget about it as well?'

His words cut Aoi deeply. Although she expected him to eventually reject her again, he didn't think that he would do so unprompted. That, out of nowhere, he himself would twist the knife in her chest without her having to ask him again if all the love he confessed to her held any truth. Leave it to Yusaku to know just how to hurt her in the most painful ways. In this absurdly hurtful situation, Aoi could do nothing but laugh hollowly, 'Sure.' she said in an overly chipper tone, though her voice was shaking. 'It's already forgotten.'

'Good.'

That was when he finally left her. He stood up and walked over to his desk so that he could quickly pack his bag for his classes. A burst of courage flashed through Aoi, and she rose to her feet and attempted to hold his hand. But when she reached out and her fingertips brushed his wrist, he sharply pulled away and tightened his hand into a fist so that she wouldn't be able to intertwine her fingers around his. Aoi's chest tightened. Her heart sank and she felt like she had taken a hard punch to the gut.

Yusaku's message was clear: *Fuck off*.

'I'm going.' he announced curtly and, without so much as looking at her, made his way out the door.

Aoi was shellshocked.

Sure, she had expected Yusaku to revert back to his off-putting demeanour in the morning... But she didn't think that he could dehumanize her to this extent. He didn't ask her how she was feeling nor did he address what happened last night properly. Aoi strongly believed that Yusaku should have, if only to gently let her in on the unfortunate truth that his supposed *love confession* was nothing more than his erection speaking. Aoi would have appreciated that much more than what he just gave her: a flippant flick of his wrist, like she was dust on his shoulder that he had to brush off.

She had never felt so humiliated in her life.

Suddenly very aware that she was alone in his room, she crossed her arms over her chest defensively and looked around her. Her gaze immediately fell to his bed, igniting a trigger point in her that caused all of last night's erotic memories to tumble into her mind. Had she and Yusaku negotiated a more healthy (and loving) relationship, those memories would have made her smile. But right now, they just made her feel like a snake was coiling around her neck, preventing her from breathing, embracing her in its taut hopelessness.

Aoi didn't want to look at that bed any longer.

So she walked over to it, tore the sheets away from the mattress, and shoved them in the washing machine. Her heart was pounding while she was doing this. It made her feel like she had some control over the situation. Maybe she could never gain the upper hand against her cruel lover in terms of emotional dominance, but she could at least erase the evidence of their intimacy. Perhaps she thought that it would alleviate just some of her anxiety about it, like she could almost pretend like it never happened because there was no proof.

But as she sauntered into the bathroom and caught her reflection in the mirror, she saw his invisible hands on her again, caressing her and grabbing at as much flesh as he could like he wanted to make sure she was really within his grasp. Quickly, she looked away and hopped into the shower. As the water bounced off of her body, Aoi allowed herself to be lost in thought

and steam. Specifically, she gave herself the selfish luxury of feeling every pent-up emotion she had been holding in since she left home.

She misses her brother; her brother, who seemed to want to clip her wings.

She resents herself; she hates that she's not as strong or positive or beautiful as Blue Angel.

She admires Yusaku's heroism, in the way he so valiantly fights for everyone in LINK VRAINS - including herself.

She loves Yusaku for everything he's done for her.

She hates Yusaku for what he's doing to her.

She hates him so much. She hates that he's so horrible to her. She hates that he lures her in with hot kisses and seductive words. She hates that he isn't the man she thought he was, and she's never been so disappointed in another human being before.

This boiling loathing was heating up inside of her as she changed into her school uniform robotically. Ai watched her from the desk, perched on top of the Duel Disk. It noticed a significant change in her body language. Aoi was observably stiffer, and her facial features had settled into a stony mask that was reminiscent of how she appeared when school first started.

It was chilling.

Ai thought that maybe she had actually turned into marble.

Then, a whimper.

And suddenly, she was slumped over the mattress, her knees to the floor and her face buried on her arms that were folded on the bed.

'Oh no, Aoi-chan... Come on, don't cry...' Ai used to modified Duel Disk to fly over to her. Once within range, the Ignis tried to stroke her hand, but she moved away from it. Nevertheless, Ai tried desperately to soothe the

weeping woman by offering words of encouragement, but its efforts were made in vain. Aoi couldn't control herself. The tears just kept coming, and loud sobs insisted on escaping her. She felt unbelievably cold, like her heart had turned into ice and everything else inside of her was following suit.

She was so *sad*.

'He's a jerk, I know.' Ai acknowledged, panicking. *Shit*. How was its going to clean up after its master's crap this time? 'He can be really mean, but it's just some nasty defence mechanism!'

Ai's case was unconvincing. Aoi continued sobbing, at this point randomly gasping for air to try and calm herself down. The sight of her breaking was mortifying. Ai was searching its database for any sort of option for an appropriate reaction to give, but there was no data concerning troubleshooting an emotional crisis like this.

'Don't cry.' Ai pleaded, waving its arms about. 'Yusaku loves you! He loves you, I swear! He loves you, so please don't cry anymore!'

'No, he doesn't.' she bit out shakily. 'He hates me.'

'Oh my gawd, what!?' Ai fell to its knees dramatically. 'No! He loves you! I swear that he loves you!'

'He hates me.' Aoi repeated, palming her chest. Her heart felt like it was about to explode. Was she supposed to feel like she was going to die? 'I know he hates me. I can't do anything about it. He hates me-'

'He *loves* you!' Ai howled, jumping up and down, frustrated. 'He loves you, he loves you! Trust me! He's just being a dick, but he *loves* you!'

'He wants nothing to do with me.' she insisted, hunching over and clutching her stomach. She was dizzy all of a sudden and her gut felt like it had been punched. She had the sudden, dry urge to throw up, but forced herself to remain composed. With one arm still crossed over her abdomen, a hand came up so that she could bit her fingers. She shut her eyes and desperately

willed herself to not throw up. Ai mistook this for her trying to silence her sobs.

'He doesn't hate you at all! He loves you! He thinks you're a babe-'

'He thinks I'm a *slut*.'

'No!'

'When he looks at me, I know that he sees a cheap whore. He treats me like he *pays* for the sex we have.'

'No, no! He cares about you! He bought you clothes, he let you stay here-'

'I don't care! The one thing he doesn't give me is *respect*!'

Ai jumped up and down frantically. It was blubbering like an idiot, trying to find words that would never form to completion. What could it say to Aoi in a time like this? There was no excusing Yusaku's actions, and to devalue Aoi's feelings would only add kerosene to the fire. There was nothing Ai could do or say to positively impact the situation. At the very least, it just wanted Aoi to stop crying - but it couldn't think of an effective method by which it could accomplish that, either.

'I've given up on his love a long time ago.' she admitted sadly, catching her breath. The tears were still flowing, but her lowering adrenaline allowed her to regain some semblance of control over her outburst. 'But I think that no matter what, even though I've thrown myself at him, that I deserve to be treated like a human being... And he doesn't even do that.'

'That's just how he is!'

'I don't care.' she said sternly, finally getting up on her feet. She went to the bathroom to wash her face and clear her expression of any depression (she was an expert at that). Once she was satisfied with her perfectly practiced stony visage, she headed back to the main room and took the bedsheets out of the wash. Ai tried talking to her, but she maintained her silence as she

dried the sheets in a machine and made the bed afterwards. She was aware of Roboppi's cleaning duties, but she took it upon herself anyway to render the space spotless. It was therapeutic, almost like she was ridding the place of any evidence that she was there.

By the time she was finished with her chores, it was well past noon. She could go to school, but she'd only be able to attend the classes that were scheduled after the lunch break and she would get in big trouble for her tardiness. Plus, she didn't have her school bag anyway: she had left it at home, not thinking to bring it with her when she stormed out.

And she certainly didn't want to stay where she was.

The only option was to go back home.

Yusaku was on high-alert at school.

He was anticipating when Aoi would show up, and when he would inevitably bump into her. He knew that would be by far the most awkward experience of his life. After all, he had inadvertently confessed to her last night that he was in love with her - a secret that he had desperately tried to keep under lock and key since the first vine of affection he felt for Aoi constricted around his heart. And then he broke two of his own rules: to not speak of love and to always use protection. *Why* did he not think to use a condom? He was already living in a perpetual state of anxiety from not knowing whether or not she was pregnant, and yet his actions now exacerbated those same concerns.

If she was actually pregnant, what would he do? He had no idea how to answer that question. He hoped somehow that perhaps she was on some form of birth control, but he never had the balls to ask her nor did he think it was necessarily his business. In hindsight, it was *absolutely* his business; they were sleeping with each other, so they had to share the responsibility of these possibilities. That was why he decided to buy a contraceptive pill to proceed with his life with some caution. Additionally, he was almost certainly convinced that Aoi herself wouldn't want to be pregnant. They

were so young and *stupid*. How could they handle a situation like that? They couldn't even properly handle each other.

With these thoughts circulating in a never-ending loop in his mind, Yusaku dreaded Aoi turning up at every corner. Strangely enough, she never did. He thought that perhaps she was avoiding him as well. Even so, it was still likely that he could have at least noticed her in passing.

Maybe she was still at his place?

Or perhaps she had left but returned home?

Yusaku's head was pounding. It was too stressful to think about all of this. He *knew* he shouldn't have gotten involved with her; it was too much work without anything to gain. He could never see himself as a suitable partner in a committed relationship, so all this emotional labor was being made in vain.

So he tried to push his inner dialogue aside as he headed into Shoichi Kusanagi's hot dog truck. Yusaku winced as he took a step up. He was unbelievably sore from last night. For his age, he was well built (maybe due to the constant physical strain of LINK VRAINS), yet he felt like he was moving with blocks of lead strapped to his limbs. His back was aching and he swore that he must've pulled a muscle last night.

'I want you.' Aoi whispered so softly, she may as well have been uttering a secret.

Yusaku stumbled a little when he closed the truck's doors behind him.

The heat rushed to his face.

What the hell?

Why did he think of Aoi just now?

More specifically, why did he think of *last night's* Aoi?

He was so lost in his own mind that he didn't remember to greet Shoichi, who was seated in front of the computers but was observing Yusaku with amusement.

'So how was your romantic weekend?' Shoichi asked with a smug grin plastered on his face. That question caused Yusaku's head to snap up immediately, his expression shocked and bashful like a dog who had just been caught digging where he shouldn't have. 'Haha... Was it so fun that you forgot how to speak?'

'I can speak just fine.' Yusaku snapped. He then proceeded to take his seat by Shoichi's side.

'You look kind of spaced out is all I'm saying. Anyway...' the older man raised a brow upon noticing that Yusaku's Duel Disk was absent from his arm. 'Where's Ai?'

'I left him at home.'

'Why?'

'I left in a hurry this morning.' Yusaku shrugged. 'It was an honest mistake.'

Shoichi frowned. 'And Zaizen's sister didn't think to remind you? She seems like the type to be conscientious about those things.'

'No. I didn't go to school with her.'

'Huh? But isn't she staying at your place?'

Yusaku rubbed his face. This was such an awkward conversation. Sure, he was close to Shoichi, but the young student didn't want to have to reveal the details of his intimate life. Then again, what was the harm in talking about it? If it really didn't mean anything to him, if Aoi was really not a special girl? 'Yeah... But the atmosphere between her and I was kind of weird this morning, considering that I gave her an emergency contraceptive pill.'

Shoichi's jaw dropped.

Yusaku's posture straightened.

'Don't you use a condom?'

Yusaku sighed heavily. 'Not last night.'

'That's... Not the smartest idea. You should use protection, always. You don't want to have a-'

'I also said that I loved her.' Yusaku blurted. 'But I don't think she heard me.'

That silenced the small business owner. He leaned back and stared intently at his junior. Shoichi was trying to read his body language, but as usual, Yusaku had excellent control over his projection. He gave nothing away and his rigid stature was impossible to read. Nevertheless, Shoichi knew that for Yusaku to even bring something like that up was a sign that he needed help coming to grips with his confusing emotions.

Ah, youth; what a joy and a pain to be so young and passionate.

'*Do* you love her?'

Yusaku didn't respond, but his heart rate quickened.

'Well..' Shoichi cleared his throat. 'Regardless, you shouldn't have just handed her the pill and left. That's not how you treat women. You might have really hurt her feelings.'

'I know. That's all I seem to do.' he crossed his arms over his chest defensively. 'So... Whether I love her or not is irrelevant. I don't deserve her and I probably never will.'

Hey guys! Thank you so much for reading this story. Thanks also for your kind reviews. I enjoy reading your encouraging words!

Yet again, I was taken aback by the response from last chapter. Thank you guys so much for your encouragement. I tried to get this chapter up as quickly as possible. I know not a lot happened in this chapter, but it was meant to be more of an exploratory segment before all the events that are about to unfold.

Thanks to everyone for being so accepting of the multiple routes idea for this story! Thanks again to Yujo0147 for suggesting it.

In a few chapters, the routes will start to diverge. I will start with the bad route, then move on to the good, before ending with the true route. I'll label each chapter with its corresponding route as to not cause any confusion. That won't happen for the next few chapters, though!

If you have an account, I've already messaged you privately. If you don't have an account, then I respond to you below!

Yujo0147, the bad ending definitely won't have a Clannad-esque feel! I already have an idea for it, and it isn't so much tragic as it is unsatisfactory, if that makes sense. I will be writing the bad route first, though! Thank you so much for wishing me luck on my exams and for your always encouraging words!

JustARandomGuy, Yusaku's machine-mask will definitely be peeling off more as the story progresses. And thank you so much for wishing me luck on my exams, and for your continued support in this story!

Aniki, I'm glad that you pointed out that they really should be able to feel each other's love properly, because that is exactly the direction where this story will go. Yusaku has to come to terms with his feelings, then work on bettering himself for Aoi if he wants their relationship to be successful. How exactly he does it while battling issues of self-worth from his traumatic past will be a central focus! Thank you so much for your support!

Guest, Yusaku may not lie, but he certainly won't be accommodating of Aoi's feelings just because he's realized he has them too. Because Aoi's

had enough of his iciness, he will have to figure himself out soon! And yes, Ai heard it and will bring it up with Yusaku in later chapters, especially after having witnessed Aoi's breakdown. Thank you for your review!

Guest, Akira never got her checked. The suitor will return, but he won't be around long! He won't be a major character, but he may play a role in a major event. Thank you for your review!

15. Blood In The Water

Aoi wandered aimlessly throughout Den City for majority of the day. She didn't go to school, nor did she immediately head home. Instead, she took her sweet time walking along a pebbled road along the coast line. The salty breeze of ocean water fanning her face was therapeutic; the scent permeated her lungs with the chill of unknown depths, and she felt comfortably small in what she realized was such a big, unpredictable world. This notion put her mortality into perspective, which then compelled her all the more to return home to her brother.

Her stepbrother, who was always more like a father to her: she loved him endlessly, but she felt like she was never allowed to be herself under his scrutiny. Even now, although wanting to see him again, she feared his judgement. She was certain that he was going to bombard her with a series of questions prying into her intimate life.

What did you do with that boy?

Did he rape you?

Are you seriously sleeping with a man who doesn't love you?

Aoi let out a long sigh. Just thinking about what their next conversation would be like was irritating her.

Nevertheless, she knew she had to woman up and take responsibility for her choices. She knew that running away from home and seeking refuge with Yusaku was going to open a can of worms that would be challenging to deal with. Still, she maintained that she didn't do anything wrong... So what was there to be nervous about? Even if Akira judged her poorly, there was nothing she could do to take back her actions now. She'd rather look forward than be stuck on the past. Just like how she would rather distance herself from Yusaku despite her feelings for him, instead of waiting on a love that was never going to bear fruit.

Aoi covered her mouth with a hand, using the other to stabilize herself against a concrete wall. There it was again; her dizzy spells when she felt like she was going to throw up. Perhaps it was because of all the stress she was going through. Or was it a side effect of the contraceptive pill she took earlier in the day? Or maybe she was just freaking out that she was going to have to face her brother again. Whatever the reason, the nausea wasn't helping.

'Welcome back, Aoi-san.' a robot greeted her at the its place in the building concierge.

Aoi ignored it and swiped her access card by the elevators. A familiar ding sounded off when the doors parted, and she stepped in to take the dreaded ride up to her apartment. What time was it? She checked her phone: 11:50. She winced - yikes! She hadn't even realized that she was out and about in town for so long. Maybe she wouldn't even have to confront Akira tonight. Maybe he was sleeping. Maybe the universe was giving her a well-deserved break.

Slim chance of that happening, but the hope kept her calm and collected.

The elevator doors opened and she stepped into her home. Immediately, her negative emotions alleviated somewhat. It was nice to physically be back in a space that she recognized. She could almost laugh at the unfortunate outcome of her run-away stint.

She left home with the intention of healing from the pain inflicted on her by her brother, but ended up returning to escape the unbearable sting of staying by Yusaku's side.

Akira was right: but she wasn't about to let him know that. Besides, she regretted nothing of this past weekend. She was glad to have had the opportunity to make her own mistakes.

Aoi stopped in her tracks in the living room, pondering what to do next. Should she head up to her room quietly? No, she should greet her brother and have that difficult conversation *now*. But where was he? Since he was

promoted back to Security Manager and had to work long hours, he might still be at work. Then again, the lights were on, so *someone* must've been home.

The unsure teenager decided to head up to his bedroom, to see if he was still awake.

She took off her shoes and carried them in one hand as to not make a sound when she climbed up the steps. It would be her nightmare come true if Akira yelled at her from the top of the staircase, berating her with the volume of a megaphone. Stealthily, she tiptoed from one step to the next. However, she could hear undecipherable sounds coming from the top floor. Was Akira watching television? It didn't sound like it. It sounded like... Like hushed whispers and stifled screams?

It was only when Aoi reached the top that she could hear the dialogue well.

'Am I just fodder to you?' Akira's voice cracked, emanating from his bedroom. The door was slightly ajar, but Aoi dare not look inside. Her brother sounded brokenly humiliated - she knew the feeling. But never in a million years did she think that she would witness Akira display such helplessness.

Who was he talking to?

'No...' a feminine voice - which Aoi shockingly recognized as Emma Bessho's - replied to Akira in a syrupy-sweet octave. 'I care about you, you know that.'

Aoi's heart skipped a beat. A magnetic force compelled her to stay put. She knew that she shouldn't have been eavesdropping, but the raw emotion in the atmosphere drew her in. It was such a weird experience, listening in on her brother when he sounded pathetically human. The only times she's ever really witnessed him unmasked was either when he was angry or worried for her. In this moment, he was neither. He was just... *sad*.

'You care about me?' Akira sounded incredulous. 'That's a joke. You care about me insofar as I'm a good client and you can squeeze me for as much money-'

'Don't be ridiculous. Are you paying for my time here? No... I'm here because you're upset. If I didn't care about you, why would I be checking up on you?'

'Because you like seeing me upset.'

'I *never* want to see you upset. Akira, please.' Emma's voice turned serious, offended. 'Enough. You're starting to sound crazy.'

'I'm not crazy, I'm pissed off-'

'But why with me?!' Emma was exasperated. 'I didn't do anything!'

'I just detest the kind of woman you are.' he spat out and even Aoi could feel the venom in his words. She didn't have to have a good view of him to know that he was probably frowning, his lips pulled back in a menacing snarl with a gleam in his eyes that signalled danger. Once Akira's patience had run out, there was no stopping him from emotionally bulldozing the other person with his hurtful judgement. Being under Akira's disapproving gaze was like swimming in a shark-infested pool while there was blood in the water: there was no escaping his razor-sharp attack. 'You aren't serious about anything. You have no real moral compass, you'll do anything to get ahead of you! Yet you have nothing going for you, Emma: nothing *real*! You are exactly what you call yourself; a *ghost girl*. You don't have friends or loved ones because you're incapable of committing to anything other than your shallow desire for trouble! You-'

'See!' Emma interrupted, her pitch climbing uncharacteristically high. Aoi always admired the older woman for being so strong-willed and flippant in the face of peril. But this time, Aoi could clearly hear the breaking emotion in Emma's voice. 'That's always been your problem, Akira! You think everybody should have a stick up their ass, just like you! And anyone who

doesn't live by the same stringent rules is branded by your ego as good-for-nothing! That problematic way of thinking is exactly why Aoi-san left you!'

'Don't talk about my sister!' Akira growled. 'You have no right!'

'It's why *I* left you!'

Aoi covered her mouth to prevent a shocked gasp from escaping her.

What happened next was difficult to decipher. Due to the surprising revelation, Aoi's mind was hazy. She couldn't focus on the next words being exchanged by Akira and Emma, but Aoi soon recognized the onset of audible lovemaking. The rustle of clothes being discarded onto the floor and the desperate breathing snapped her out of her stupor. Immediately after, she turned on her heel and beelined for her room as quietly as possible. She didn't want to hear what those two were up to. In fact, she didn't even know how to make sense of it.

Aoi turned the knob to her bedroom door and entered after what felt like a century. Her tense muscles immediately relaxed once she was within the confines of her own space. Her bed was seductively soft-looking, the scent of lavender that seemed to permeate the atmosphere all the time was calming, and the pleasantly cool colours of the walls around her made her feel at ease... Which was an interesting notion, considering that her reality was essentially coming up in smoke. Her older brother was fight-fucking his ex-lover down the hall (which was nothing less than shocking, especially considering how Akira felt about casual sexual activity), Yusaku didn't turn out to be the man she thought he was, and her heart was broken.

What a day.

Aoi climbed onto her bed and allowed herself to collapse on it. She didn't realize how heavy her eyelids were until now. She knew that she should get up, change, and get ready for bed, but she couldn't find the energy to be compelled to do so. The past weekend felt like a gruelling emotional marathon, sprinkled with hopeful moments when she thought she was finally cracking the icy exterior of the man she was shamefully in love with.

To have those hopes shattered in such a dismissive way was a blow she wasn't sure she could recover from so quickly. But she thought that the first step towards healing was to allow herself to sleep.

Aoi shut her eyes.

Her cellphone vibrated in her breast pocket.

With a loud sigh, Aoi reached for it. Who could it be at this hour?

When Yusaku went back to his apartment, he fully expected Aoi to still be there. He thought that if she wasn't at school, then the next logical place for her to be in was his room. That, of course, was a ludicrous notion, but Yusaku somehow momentarily forgot that Aoi didn't belong with him. So when he came home to an empty unit, he was nothing less than shocked. It was like reality slapped him hard; Aoi went back to her brother, just like she said she would. It's not like this came out of the blue. She warned him. He should have known.

But it *hurt* so badly.

He didn't anticipate for her absence to weigh over him like a dark cloud, crushing him under its unbearable mass. It was paralyzing. He simply stood by the foot of his bed, staring so intently into the sheeted mattress that he might as well have been burning holes into it. The memory of Aoi wrapping the blankets around herself awkwardly, looking at him with a pitiful expression after he handed her the oral contraceptive, was replaying over and over on an endless loop in his mind's eye. He knew that the manner by which he addressed the issue of protection was callous.

He was such an asshole to her. How could he blame her for leaving? And furthermore, how could he blame her for leaving him when he was the one who kept pushing her away?

It's for the best, he told himself, *It was never going to last.*

But the couldn't help but wonder: where did that leave them now? He didn't consider her a friend, and they knew too much about each other to simply be acquaintances. There was too much history now between them to carry on like nothing ever happened, but he had made it appear as though he wasn't invested enough in her to want to repair a damaged relationship.

And he didn't... Right?

'You don't know what you want.' Ai spoke unprompted, as if reading its master's thoughts. 'That's fine. You're allowed to be confused... But don't hurt that babe in the process of figuring yourself out.'

Yusaku didn't even bothering telling Ai to be quiet. Firstly, because he knew that the Ignis was right. Secondly, because no words could form properly in his head. He was at a loss. The reality of Aoi truly leaving him in not just the physical sense, but the emotional, left him debilitatingly lonely.

It was obvious that Aoi loved him. She made sure to let him know that every chance she got. What she held for him was pure, selfless love: and he cast it aside for solitude. Why? What for? What was the point of making them both unhappy?

Yusaku completely lost sight of why he was pushing Aoi away in the first place. Because he didn't think that he could make her happy? Well, he certainly wasn't faultless in the sadness she felt every time he rejected her. Maybe the truth was that he didn't deserve her, but he would be lying if he denied that he felt no regrets at this point. He felt nothing *but* regret.

Without thinking, he reached into his pocket to retrieve his phone. His heart was racing as he searched for Aoi's number. He held the phone up to his ear and it rang once, twice, before Aoi finally picked up. That was a surprise in itself. He thought that she would just reject his call. It was a huge relief that it seemed as though she was willing to give him her attention once more.

'Good evening.' Aoi greeted politely. 'It's late. Why are you calling at this hour?'

'Hey...' he whispered with surprising softness. 'You aren't home.'

'I am, actually.'

Yusaku chuckled humourlessly at that. *Oh right.* It's not like this place was ever her actual home. 'Yeah, I guess you are... What I meant to say is that you aren't here anymore.'

'No. I'm not.'

There was a period of silence wherein Yusaku didn't know what to say. Aoi was being irritatingly dismissive, but he couldn't blame her for that. It seemed that he had finally pushed her over the edge. Her tone was bitingly cold, like she was the frost forming on his skin as he lay out in a blizzard, naked and vulnerable. Not that he could blame her. He deserved every burst of ice she sent his way.

'Yusaku... Why did you call me?'

He thought about it.

Because I love you.

No... Too real.

Too viscerally sweet, like the way she held him when he had an episode, or the way her fingers kneaded his flesh to massage the calming oil into his skin.

Aoi deserved to be told that she was loved. Yusaku couldn't think of a single reason why someone *wouldn't* love her. She had the best qualities one could find in a person, from her naturally caring nature to her innocent desire to be loved. If anyone deserved to be told that they were loved, it was her. But Yusaku decided to stick to his conviction that those words were hollow coming from him. He didn't know how to love her properly, if this weekend was any indication of how terrible he was to her.

Aoi deserved to be loved.

But she deserved to be loved by someone worthy of being called her lover.

Not by him.

'Yusaku...?'

Yusaku cleared his throat awkwardly. 'I just wanted to thank you for everything you did for me while you were here.'

There was a pause. Then, 'I'm glad that I wasn't a complete burden to you.'

Yusaku didn't say anything back. What was he supposed to respond with? But he didn't want to hang up either. So another dreadful length of silence befell them, with Yusaku's fingers pressing dangerously hard against the metal casing of his phone. It was like he was holding onto Aoi herself, not wanting to let her go to the point of almost breaking her. Yet he already knew that she was finally out of his reach. That was a hard pill to swallow.

'Yusaku... It's late.'

That snapped him out of his stony silence. 'Right... Sorry. I won't keep you up any longer.'

'Yeah...'

'So...' he swallowed a knot at his throat. 'Be well.'

'You too. Take care of yourself, OK?'

'OK.'

'Hehe... That's a promise, right?'

'Yes.'

'I'll hold you to it then. Anyway... I'm going to hang up now.'

Yusaku whispered a strained, 'Alright,' before gritting his teeth with so much force they could have shattered.

'Good night, Yusaku.'

'Good night.'

'Yeah... Goodbye.'

Hey guys! Thanks so much for all your support in this story. My exams are done so I may be able to shell out chapters faster. Since the new character Takeru Homura will be a big part of this story, I sort of want to wait and see how he interacts with the rest of the cast in the official series, although I'm not sure when exactly he will appear as the chapters progress.

If you have an account, I've already replied to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Yujo0147, that's exactly it; Yusaku now has to earn the trust that he never actually deserved. And now that he knows he messed up big time, he'll have to find his own path to reconnecting with Aoi! Hmm... I won't give anything out about the bad route! But that is an interesting idea. One thing I will say though, is that both the good and bad routes will be a little OOC to differentiate them from the true route. I'll try to the best of my abilities to make the true route the most in-character. Thanks for your continued support!

Aniki, either one of Aoi and Yusaku could definitely lose it in the bad route. It's an idea I'm trying to wrestle with. Thanks so much for your review!

Guest, Emma and Aoi will definitely be having more interactions! And yes, Yusaku will have to sort this situation out.

Guest, apologies for the longer-than-usual wait on this chapter! The next chapters may come out sooner.

Guest, the bad route will not be using that plot outline!

16. Wild Card

Yusaku hardly caught a wink of sleep.

He tossed and turned uncomfortably around in his bed, until he finally gave up and decided to do some school work on his desk. Occupying his mind with his studies was a surprisingly effective distraction against his demons. He was so immersed in his tasks that he didn't notice the sun beginning to rise. He also didn't pay any mind to exhaustion creeping in. Thus, by morning, the weight of his repressed fatigue hit him like a ton of bricks. Dark bags formed under his eyes and his already short temper was nearing the end of its fuse as a default.

'You look like shit.' Ai remarked, unprompted.

'Whatever.' Yusaku grunted and shut off his computer. Then, he headed to the bathroom, where he hopped into the shower. Rolling streams of hot water calmed his unusually tense muscles. Well, he was always tense... But today, they were even more so, to the point where it was physically paining him. He tried to shake his shoulders to loosen them up a bit, but it was no use.

His body hurt like hell.

'Fuck me.' Yusaku cursed under his breath when he bent down to pull his trousers up. There was a soreness at the small of his back that sharpened with that motion.

'Huh? What happened?' Ai tilted its head.

'Nothing.'

'That didn't sound like nothing...'

'It's not a big deal. My back just hurts.'

'Oh, really? Did you fall or something?'

'No...' Yusaku winced as he pulled his jacket over his shoulders. *Damn,* he thought, *Can't do that either without it hurting?* 'Maybe it's because I was sitting up all night.'

'Or maybe you're depressed.'

Yusaku shot Ai a hard glance. 'What?'

'Humans have interesting bodies!' Ai wagged a finger in front of its face. 'Studies show that the mental and physical aspects of human bodies are interconnected. So if you're in emotional distress, even if there's no physical injury, symptoms like pain or insomnia will manifest.'

'I have insomnia from time to time.' Yusaku snapped. 'And my back must just be sore from sitting up all night.'

'You've done that before and never had any back pains.'

'Enough.' the student sighed and started packing his bag for school.

'You know... I'm worried about that cutie.'

Yusaku's posture noticeably stiffened.

'She was so sad when you left her yesterday.' Ai continued. 'She was crying so much. I didn't know humans could cry so much. It was hurting her.'

'I see...'

'But you kind of expected that, didn't you, Yusaku? It's what you wanted, isn't it? That's why you rejected her so cruelly... Even when she just wanted to hold your hand...'

Yusaku didn't respond.

Ai steamrolled on, 'She said that you think she's a slut.'

'That's *not* true.' Yusaku's voice rose defensively. 'I don't think of her that way at all.'

'Yeah, well...' Ai shrugged. 'Maybe not. But that's how you make her feel.'

Yusaku's heart sank. The Ignis was just confirming what he already knew: he made Aoi feel like shit. There was no denying that. Sometimes, it was to intentionally push her away, but other times, he just didn't know what he was doing. Not that he was ever going to let her know that. It was better for her to stay clear of him anyway. This was the best possible outcome for both of them.

I tell myself that it's for the best, but...

'Don't you miss her, Yusaku?'

'Come on.' Yusaku ignored the question and placed his Duel Disk on his arm. 'We're going to be late for school.'

When Aoi awoke in the morning, she was embarrassed to realize that she was still in the uniform she wore last night. Disgusted with herself, she beelined for the bathroom, where she undressed quickly and took a shower. Normally, the steamy water was calming, but today, it seemed to aggravate a perpetual sense of nausea that plagued her since the day before. She tried her best not to give into it, and she was succeeding for the most part.

Once she was finished, she dressed herself in a clean uniform. She examined herself in the mirror. She appeared shockingly normal, as if she hadn't just spent an entire weekend sharing a bed with a guy she barely knew. It was almost funny.

Suddenly, there was a knock on her door.

Aoi's stomach churned with debilitating anxiety.

'Y-Yes?' she called out bravely.

'Aoi...' Akira said softly. 'Breakfast is ready downstairs.'

'Thank you.' she paused. 'I'll be there soon.'

'Alright.'

She heard his footsteps fade away, but her heart was starting to race. *Shit.* Akira knew she was home, but he was acting like nothing was wrong. Something *had* to be wrong, it just had to be! Her brother usually had no qualms about letting his opinion be known, but today, he was taking the odd route of... pretending like nothing was amiss. Which was beyond strange behaviour for him. Aoi was already nervous about facing him when he was angry, but now, she had to confront him when he was out of character.

Her anxiety skyrocketed.

When she finally took her seat at the dining table, Akira was already helping himself to some bread. She looked at him in the hopes of making eye contact, but he didn't so much as glance her way. The silence was nerve-wracking, but she was determined to just get through this awkward situation. She turned her attention to her plate; scrambled eggs and three links of sausages. The sight was mouthwatering, but Aoi never had much of an appetite. Truthfully, she only ate around her brother so that he wouldn't worry. Otherwise, she was perfectly fine just drinking water.

'Good morning, Aoi-chan!' the robot maid greeted the young girl as it glided over. 'Your Onii-sama missed you!'

Aoi's eyes flew to her brother, who was now staring right at her.

Well.

Leave it to the robot to break the ice.

'Of course I missed you.' he sighed, breaking his bread absent-mindedly. 'You were gone for a few days. I'm not used to being home without you.'

'Ah...' Aoi tried to speak, but struggled to find the words. 'Well... I'm back now, if you'll still want me around.'

'You know that I will always wait for you to come.'

Aoi's face brightened automatically. Her chest fluttered happily, touched by the unconditional acceptance of her brother. She smiled and somehow, the tension between the siblings dissipated. 'Thank you, Onii-sama.'

'But... We do have to talk about what happened.'

Aoi nodded without hesitation. She felt more confident about this.

'You went to stay with Fujiki Yusaku...'

Upon hearing the name of her lover, Aoi visibly stiffened. Nevertheless, she maintained her composure. No emotion was readable in her expression.

'Aoi... I remain firm on what I told you before. There are consequences to being sexually active at your age. And, there are even more consequences that will arise from giving yourself to someone who doesn't deserve you. No good will come out being with that boy, Aoi.'

Aoi smiled bitterly to herself. This speech again, huh?

'I followed you. I saw where he lives. He stays in... Well, in a place that isn't so nice. Aoi, I've worked hard to provide for you, to give you nice things. I don't want you to be with someone who can't do the same for you, even if he is still young.'

'You just don't like him.' Aoi stated matter-of-factly.

'Of course I don't.'

'But *I* like him.'

'Aoi...' Akira rubbed his temples. 'You're... Not thinking. You know, when you get married, you'll regret not saving yourself for your husband.'

'Onii-sama... You're not married, right?'

Akira scoffed. 'Are you trying to be funny? Do you think I've gone off and gotten married while you were gone?'

'So... Even though you're not married, you're allowed to have sex with whichever woman you like?'

Akira dropped his bread on his plate. He leered at his sister with painful eyes and a hung jaw. What did she just say?

'I heard you two last night.' she admitted. 'I know what you guys did. I also know that you two aren't married to each other.'

A heavy silence befell the siblings.

Aoi was confidently stoic, and Akira could do nothing but stare at her incredulously. She couldn't tell if he wanted to yell at her or run away. For once, she didn't care. She was up to her neck with her brother's hypocrisy. There was no way she was going to play this game, pretending like he was a martyr and that she was Satan's spawn. Despite her strict upbringing, Aoi's belief that she alone was responsible for her agency was unshakable. She wasn't going to allow anyone to tell her what to do - not even the person who raised her.

'Aoi... You don't know what happened. Don't talk about things you don't understand.'

'I *do* understand.' she insisted. She wasn't about to be swayed. 'Even if I don't know all the details, I know that you like her and she doesn't like you back. So the only way for you to feel close to her is-'

'*Aoi*.' Akira banged a fist on the table. His brows were knit together and his lips were pulled back in an intimidating snarl. Hearing those words out loud, that Emma didn't return his feelings, was a huge blow to his ego. He felt like he had just been hit by a truck. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'It's the same for me.' Aoi continued calmly. 'The person I like doesn't like me back, but I thought that I could endure the rejection as long as we spent time together. But by his side, I've never felt more alone.' her voice hushed into a whisper and Akira's features softened. He observed Aoi's eyes wobble with the threat of tears. His heart broke for her.

What was he supposed to say?

Was he supposed to get mad at her again? Lecture her? Aoi already knew what went wrong; Akira could tell. His little sister was hurting deeply and he could do nothing as he watched harsh reality crush her with its unbearable mass. Yet, it was an experience that he knew Aoi would have to go through in order to mature. And it was one of those life-changing events that he couldn't protect her from.

What was he supposed to say?

That it was going to be alright? Because it wasn't. That would be the biggest lie. From this experience, Aoi's perception of relationships and romance would be forever skewed. Perhaps for the better - perhaps she would be smarter, more cautious. Perhaps she would discover her worth and consolidate a powerful sense of self-actualization.

What was he supposed to say?

He's supposed to say nothing. She doesn't need him to say anything. She only needs him to hold her hand and listen to her pain. Because in the end, she was going to get through it. He could help her do that. It was the only thing he *could* do.

'Aoi... Are you alright?'

'No.' her voice cracked and she palmed her chest. 'My heart... It hurts. I feel like it could stop at any moment.'

Akira nodded slowly. 'Yeah... It's going to feel like that.,' he murmured as he stood and made his way to her. Once in front of her, he placed a hand on

one of her shoulders. He gave her a tight squeeze, and she reached up to hold his hand in hers.

'How do I make it stop, Onii-sama?'

'You don't.'

'How did *you* make it stop?'

Akira chuckled. 'I saw other women.'

Aoi rolled her eyes, but a smile played on her features. Typical. Who knew her brother was such a ladies' man? 'Did that really work?'

'Yes. But I don't think that's what you want to do.'

'No. It isn't.'

Their conversation paused. Akira was the first to speak again, 'Aoi... You should give that colleague of mine a chance.'

Aoi's jaw tightened. Not this again.

'Who knows?' Akira tried to sound lively. 'You may end up falling for him. At the very least, he'd be a good distraction.'

'Hey!' Naoki Shima poked a half-asleep Yusaku on the head. 'Wake up! Geez, how are you passing your classes?!'

Irritated, Yusaku shot his classmate a stern glare. Nevertheless, he sat up and was somewhat appreciative to be notified that class was over.

'Hey...' Naoki leaned in closer to his not-so-willing-to-be-friendly companion. The shorter student had a lopsided, mischievous grin that signalled nothing but trouble. 'You and Zaizen, huh?'

Yusaku stood up quickly. What the hell? Now even Naoki was linking him to Aoi? He had to get out of this situation as possible. 'Don't be stupid.' Yusaku dismissed the implication. 'There's nothing going on between me and her.'

'Sure. That's why you stare at her with googly eyes.'

'Who was Yusaku stalking a while ago?' Takeru Homura - Yusaku's good friend and ally - waltzed into the conversation. 'Yusaku!' he grinned. 'I haven't seen you in a while! You've been kind more under the radar than usual.'

Naoki laughed proudly. 'Because he's in love!'

'Oh!' Takeru smiled widely. 'Really?'

'Shut up.' Yusaku hissed at Naoki, whose face paled before he scampered off, leaving the two other students alone. Then, Yusaku turned to Takeru and lied, 'No. I'm just worried about her, that's all.'

'About who?'

'Zaizen Aoi.'

'Oh.' Takeru was confused. 'That's random. Why are you worried about her?'

'Um...' Yusaku wracked his brains for a believable claim. 'She just looks down lately. I'm just wondering if everything's alright with her.'

'Well, if you're so worried, why don't you go talk to her?'

'He can't.' Ai quipped. 'She doesn't want to talk to him.'

Yusaku breathed a sigh of relief. That was a surprise: Ai didn't reveal much.

Flame spoke up, 'Then this is a job for the unassuming, not-at-all-suspicious-looking Takeru! Right, Takeru?'

'You...' the silver-haired man frowned at his Ignis. 'Don't just put that responsibility on me. But, on a serious note...' he beamed at Yusaku. 'I can talk to her, if you like. Though she might not open up to me, since she doesn't know me...'

'And she's supposed to know me?' Yusaku raised a brow. No one knew about him and Aoi at school, not even Takeru. Yusaku made it a point to keep that aspect of his life private. Though Takeru was a formidable duelist and a dependable friend, he wouldn't say that he had the sharp deductive skills to have worked out that he had a sexual relationship with Aoi.

'Oh. I guess you're right.' Takeru laughed. 'So... What do you say? Should I go with Flame's ridiculous idea?'

Yusaku thought about it. It didn't sound so ridiculous, actually.

'Just let me know if that's something you'd like me to do.' Takeru's smile was warm. 'I can talk to Zaizen Aoi for you and see what's bothering her.'

Hey guys! Thanks so much for reading and reviewing this story. Your encouragement means a lot to me, and is why I keep going with this project!

Also, I want to clarify that in this story, all the characters are away of their identities and are somewhat familiar with each other. For example, Aoi knows that Yusaku is Playmaker, Takeru knows that Aoi is Blue Angel, etcetera.

If you have an account, I've already responded to your review privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Yujo0147, this is not yet the dark route, and I swore it won't get much worse from here! I just thought it was necessary for Yusaku and Aoi to hit rock bottom before anything healthy begins to change in their relationship. Thank you for your continued support!

Aniki, yes there will be parallels but there will also be important differences that impact how Aoi perceives her relationship with Yusaku. Thank you for your continued support!

Guest, thank you for your review and for saying that you like my stories! That's so kind of you!

17. Boyfriends

Yusaku was supposed to be helping out in Shoichi's store for the day, but his mind was elsewhere.

It didn't take a lot of encouragement from peers to convince Takeru to talk to Aoi. Except, of course, he hasn't done it yet because he was nervous about doing so. Takeru was an impressionable young man, but he was somewhat of a shy bug. Yusaku knew this and because he valued their friendship so much (added onto the fact that Takeru was doing him a *huge* favour by even agreeing to talk to Aoi), he decided to just let Takeru go about approaching Aoi on his own time.

'By the end of the week,' Takeru had said, 'I'll definitely figure out if something's up with her!'

'Thanks.'

'But... Why are you so interested?'

Yusaku never did answer that question, but Takeru knew better than to pry into his secrets. So Yusaku thought about Aoi in isolation, having no one he was decidedly comfortable talking to about how he must have hurt her or what she could possibly be thinking right now. Ai tried to talk to its master about that topic, but Yusaku dismissed him quickly. Perhaps that was also because Ai was blatantly on Aoi's side and didn't hold back in letting its master know that. Yusaku himself knew that he had wronged Aoi in the most painful way, but he didn't need to be told over and over just how bad of a person he was.

But he wasn't ready.

Was he supposed to pretend like he was?

He had so many long-standing conflicts within himself that he had given up on sorting them out a long time ago. These issues kept him up at night, prevented him from talking to people let alone trusting them, and he had

become a gifted expert at burying his emotions away. Oftentimes, he felt like a living robot. The Ignis were more expressive of their manufactured humanity than he was about his organic one. He couldn't figure himself out, so how he could take care of Aoi? There were many times when he wanted to tell her this, but he couldn't find the words. It was so much easier to push her away.

Now that he had succeeded in doing so, he didn't feel relieved at all.

'Yusaku.' Shoichi's uncharacteristically stern voice cut through his junior's thoughts. 'Yusaku, can you stop grilling those up for a second and come over here?'

'Sure.' the student replied, finding respite in the fact that he has an excuse to get away from the the beef-saturated smoke constantly wafting against his sensitive nose. He made his way over to his boss, who had one hand on his hip and the other on top of a countertop, fingers tapping impatiently on its smooth marble. 'Kusanagi-san... Is something wrong?'

'Yeah, um...' Shoichi motioned to the garbage can, which was almost filled to the brim with discarded links of burnt meat. 'You've burnt through half my inventory for the day.'

'Oh... Sorry.'

Shoichi pinched his nose. 'Well... An apology isn't going to make up for the money I lost... I know you aren't the best cook, but you usually do just fine. What's gotten into you today?'

'He's thinking about-'

'Quiet!' Yusaku hissed at the intruding Ignis, who was perched on its Duel Disk by the computer monitors. But after his outburst, Yusaku arched his back in reaction to an intense bolt of pain that struck his lower lumbar. He groaned and reached behind instinctively to rub the sore spot. If possible, it was worse than when it started a few days ago. That was unusual. He never had body aches this intense or prolonged before.

'Is your back still bothering you?' Shoichi's tone turned concerned. 'You sure you don't want to get it checked by a doctor?'

'A doctor can't help him.' Ai sighed. 'He needs a shrink.'

'A-Ai...' Shoichi laughed half-heartedly. 'That's not very nice...'

'But I'm right! I'm telling you, Yusaku-chan's in denial about his girlfriend-'

'I *don't* have a girlfriend!' the teenager jeered. A spasm began in his back just then, and he keeled over the countertop. '*Damn it*!'

Shoichi grimaced. 'Yusaku... You're scaring me. You're acting like an old man. You really should get that checked.'

'I'm *fine*. Nothing's wrong. I'll feel better tomorrow.'

Ai narrowed its menacingly yellow eyes. 'You've been saying that for almost a week now.'

'And I'll continue to say it.'

'Yusaku...' Shoichi interjected. 'We're just worried about you. If you're having girl problems and you need to talk about it, you know that I'll always be here to give you some advice. You don't have to hold it in...'

'Yeah! Yusaku-chan, you're just going to end up hurting that cutie *and* yourself if you keep this up!

'You know *fucking what*?' Yusaku growled. 'I don't recall inviting either of you to delve into my love life. So, if you'll both *kindly fuck off*, that would be very much appreciated.'

Everyone fell silent.

Yusaku had just snapped. He *never* snapped, not really. Not like that. Not like he was ready to bite someone's head off. It caught Shoichi off guard,

and shocked the overly sensitive AI. How should they respond to such an aggressive outburst?

After a while, Ai bravely spoke up.

'So... You admit it's love?'

'How... How am I supposed to approach her?' Takeru Homura whispered bashfully to his Ignis as he trailed behind an unsuspecting Aoi Zaizen, who was walking along the school's courtyard. The timid man must have been following her for a good five minutes now, yet he was still unable to muster the courage to get this mission over with. *Man, the shit Yusaku makes me do...*

'Why are you always playing a sneaky game of hide-and-seek?' Flame bemoaned. 'You have the worst social skills. Just go up to her and strike up a conversation! You gave your word *ages* ago that you'd do this!'

Takeru winced. 'Right... But what if she thinks I'm creepy? After all, it's really random for me to just go ahead and talk to her...'

'*Life* is random. Deal with it.'

'You're no help.'

'Ah, I get it.' Flame chuckled knowingly. 'From my observations of this world, men face internal challenges when confronting beautiful women.'

'T-That's not it!' Takeru smacked his forehead with a palm.

'Then don't be a wuss! Hurry up and talk to her! Your comrade is counting on you!'

'Alright, alright, I got it!'

With forced confidence, Takeru caught up to Aoi, though he hovered a few feet behind her for the longest time. Why was this so difficult? And how

hadn't she noticed him yet? She must have been really deep in thought, because even passers-by were giving him odd looks like he was the resident pervert. Takeru felt his cheeks burn. Damn it! He looked like a freak doing this! He just wanted to get this over with quickly so he could report back some information to his best friend, and then he could hopefully forget about this awkwardly embarrassing stalker ordeal.

'Zaizen!' he called a little too cheerfully. 'Wait! I want to talk to you!'

Ai swivelled around to face the man calling out to her. Takeru stopped in his tracks, a little taken aback by the stern expression on her face. He was brought up to value friendliness, to be personable at the very least. It was unusual for him to encounter someone so uptight. Even the ice on Yusaku's shoulders chipped off fairly easily, but there was an unnerving stoniness to this girl's blank stare. Her calculatedly perfect posture and robotic movements didn't help alleviate this unapproachable image of hers. She reminded him of a doll.

'U-Um...' he stammered, wracking his brain for any excuse to carry on a conversation. He cursed himself silently - he really should have thought this through before diving in headfirst. 'A-Ah... Um-'

'Homura Takeru-kun, right?' she greeted him politely. 'Good afternoon.'

'Ah, yeah! Good afternoon.' the transfer student laughed uncomfortably as he rubbed the back of his neck with his hand.

'Why did you want to talk to me?'

'Um... Well...'

Aoi tilted her head, confused. She wondered if maybe Takeru wanted to ask for a future prospect at SOL Technologies, but recalled that he wasn't interested in computer science or development. He couldn't be asking about the new Duel Disk either because there was no new model coming out. They were acquaintances, but not close enough to be friends. Takeru wanting to have a conversation with her was almost inconceivable. So as

the young man stumbled on words that never properly formed, Aoi's silent guessing game took a dark turn.

Takeru was Yusaku's *best friend*.

He must know.

Aoi suddenly felt incredibly defensive. The heat rushed to her face. Try as she might to remain composed, she began shaking with anger. She knew *exactly* why this guy was talking to her. Since Takeru was Yusaku's confidante, there could only be one reason.

What had Yusaku told Takeru about her? Aoi was convinced that it couldn't have been anything good. Surely, Yusaku must have spoken about what they did. And that they did so over and over, each session ending with Yusaku metaphorically backhanding her only for her to come back crawling, begging for more. How pathetic must she have seemed to Takeru, or any other person that Yusaku chose to share that information with? Did she come across as so desperate for attention that even the normally shy Takeru Homura wanted to have a go with her too?

A sour taste built at the back of her throat and she felt sick. She had never felt so low in her life.

'What are you doing, talking to me out of the blue?' Aoi demanded, crossing one arm over her chest to grip the other limb. 'Did you want your turn too?' she hissed, glaring at him with hurt thinly veiled by manufactured venom, like clear saran wrap that was constricting rather than liberating.

'Huh?' the transfer student was taken aback. What was she talking about? 'My... Turn? What do you mean?'

'I don't know what he told you, but I don't just do that stuff with anybody! He was... He was...'

'Huh? Who are you talking about?'

'Don't play dumb!' her voice rose. 'I'm not some prostitute that you guys can just pass around!'

I'm so confused! Takeru screamed internally. He raised his hands up to his face in surrender, hoping that his submissive display would quell her frustration even just a little. From his peripheral, he also noted that people were starting to look. The same people who were glaring at him earlier suspecting that he was a pervert were now shaking their heads, probably thinking that he got what he deserved for whatever creepy trick he was supposedly trying to pull on Aoi.

'Geez, just give it a rest already!' she snapped before storming away. 'You're the same as him!' she called over her shoulder. 'Playing dumb, not being honest about your intentions... It's childish! You're so immature!'

Takeru watched in total confusion as she walked away. His jaw hung open and he continued to stammer nonsensically, reaching out for her but never actually taking a step forward.

'Well...' Flame quipped. 'That was unexpected.'

Takeru sighed. 'I don't even know what I did wrong... And I still got dissed.'

'Don't be a wuss!' Flame urged. 'Go chase after her and remedy this situation! You're supposed to figure out what's wrong with her, not make her mental state even worse!'

'How am I supposed to do that, genius?!' Takeru groaned. 'You saw how angry she got with me! I don't even know what I did wrong! And now you want me to go chase after her?!'

'Your comrade is counting on you!'

Takeru whimpered.

'Don't be pathetic.' Flame scolded. 'She's a woman, not a shark.'

'Debatable at this point.'

So Takeru followed her, but made no move to call out to her once again. Not only was he nervous, he was also terribly frightened of her. Never before had he such a disastrous social situation, especially at school where other students undoubtedly were going to gossip about it. Nevertheless, Flame had a point: he promised Yusaku that he would at least figure out what was up with Aoi Zaizen, and he didn't want to let his best friend down.

Aoi made it past the gates of the campus, where she stopped in front of a sleek, black sports car. He wasn't a vehicle fanatic, but even Takeru could appreciate such a beautiful machine. Although he never recalled Aoi being picked up by this car before. If it was indeed hers, she would be the talk of the entire student body.

A tall, older man (perhaps in his mid-20s) stepped out of the driver's seat and opened the door to the passenger's seat, motioning for Aoi to step inside. He then opened his mouth and was visibly saying something to the younger girl, but Takeru couldn't hear. Hence, he crept forward quickly, stealthily, until he was close enough to the pair to properly understand the conversation. He remained out of their field of vision by hiding behind a large tree.

'I told you...' Aoi's tone was polite, but her hands clenched into frustrated fists. 'You don't have to pick me up.'

'Oh?' his voice was playful. 'Don't you want to see me anymore?'

'It's not that...' she lied.

'Then what's the problem? If you have a lot of school work to do, I'm good friends with the principal. I can get your teachers off your back.'

'That's...'

The man didn't let her finish speaking. He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her dangerously close to him. Before Aoi could protest, his lips

descended upon hers and he locked her into a brutal kiss.

Takeru's jaw dropped as he bore witness to the spectacle in front of him. It was ridiculous. Aoi was obviously a non-consensual participant, struggling against him by pressing her palms up to his chest but unable to actually succeed in distancing herself from him. And the more she struggled, the harder he pulled her up against him. It made Takeru sick to his stomach. What the hell was he watching?

Why was he *just* watching?

Now it all made sense. Yusaku must have noticed that Aoi was off lately, and she must have been acting strangely because she was somehow being coerced into entertaining this predator. No wonder she was also defensive a while ago when Takeru tried talking to her.

There had to be a way out for her.

Without thinking, he came out of hiding and blurted out, 'Aoi-chan!' with an obnoxious wave of his hands, as though he were signalling to a ship from the docks. 'Aoi-chan! I've been looking all over for you!'

Upon the introduction of a third person, the man holding onto Aoi immediately pushed her away. Aoi, relieved that she escaped from the unwanted contact, breathed out. Then, she looked over her shoulder to see none other than Takeru Homura - the same guy who had offended her not at all long ago. Despite their previous encounter, she was glad to see him. It saved her in this instance.

'Aoi-chan...' Takeru happily approached his classmate. He maintained eye contact with her to hopefully let her know that he was on her side, and to play along with whatever he had planned. 'You said that we could go get dinner after school! You weren't planning on ditching me, were you?'

Aoi narrowed her eyes suspiciously. What was going on?

'Excuse me.' the older man interjected. 'Who are you?'

'Homura Takeru!' he declared proudly. 'Aoi-chan's boyfriend!'

Hey guys, thank you so much for your support in this story! Your words are really encouraging! I've been experiencing some stressful events, which is why it took a while for this chapter to be published. I am experiencing tension headaches and hope that you understand.

Also, I would like to say that I will be doing the true route first before the good or the bad routes. I've decided that it may be better pacing wise to go with the original storyline before introducing alternatives.

If you have an account, I have already responded to you privately! Otherwise, I do so below.

Yujo0147, this chapter answers most of your questions I presume! You were absolutely right in that Takeru would be the one to find out and do something about it. As for the bad end, I was initially thinking of something along those lines but decided on just an unsatisfying turn of events! Thank you for your continued support!

Guest, haha that makes sense! Also, that is a fantastic idea to have Yusaku and Akira confront each other again. Thank you so much for suggesting that! I think I will be writing into the story, and will credit you in the chapter it is featured in! Thank you for your review as well!

Aniki, aww thank you so much for saying that! And I hope that your day got better, or at the very least that you have recovered from any hardship you were going through. Thank you so much for your continued support.

18. Garbage

'Why didn't you tell me that you already had a boyfriend, Aoi?' Akira asked with surprising politeness over the dinner table.

'Um...' Aoi averted her gaze. She *didn't* have a boyfriend, but if Akira believing in this lie meant that she wouldn't have to date his colleague, then she was all for maintaining this facade.

After Takeru had stumbled upon her and her suitor, the latter quickly made his exit without even offering Aoi a ride home. Not that she minded. Rather, she was relieved not to sit beside him in his car, awkwardly trying to swat his hand away from her thigh for the hundredth time that week. Of course she wasn't interested in him, but she tolerated their outings because she wanted to please her brother. Perhaps she was also tempted by the possibility that dating someone else could distract her from thoughts of Yusaku, but that didn't turn out to be true at all. She still thought about him every day, especially at night when she looked down at the beautifully lit city from her room, wishing she could explore it with him.

But then she'd remember how badly he'd burnt her and that longing would disappear.

Only momentarily, as she craved his attention the following morning.

Even now, as she was having dinner with her brother and supposed to be thinking on her feet to keep up a lie that saved her, her mind still wandered back to Yusaku. Still, she came to the decision that she would never beg for his affection ever again. Although her heart could take an endless amount of pain, her pride was shot. How low could she go, crawling back to a man who wanted nothing to do with her?

The outcome will never change, no matter how hard I try, she thought, *I should stay away from now on, so that I can finally move forward on my own.*

'I thought at first that it might have been *that boy*...' Akira continued. 'But based on the description that my coworker gave me, am I correct in assuming that it's someone new?'

'Ah... Yeah.' Aoi winced. 'Was your friend upset?'

'Not at all. From the beginning, he had also raised concerns that you would be more interested in someone your age. So he wasn't all that surprised.'

'I see. That's good.'

'But I'm confused.' Akira frowned. 'Just last week, you told me that you still liked Fujiki Yusaku. You must have not been dating this new boy for very long, then?'

'Uh... No, I guess not.'

Akira waved a hand dismissively, not wanting to delve into the topic of Yusaku, whose name might as well have been *Voldemort* in the Zaizen household. SOL's Security Manager was already regretting bringing up the topic in the first place. He wanted to move on to nicer conversations. 'Anyway, tell me... What's this new person's name?'

'Homura Takeru-kun.'

'Well then, perhaps you can invite Homura-kun for dinner soon?'

Aoi choked on her tea mid-sip. 'W-What?'

'Well, it would be nice for me to get to know your partner this time around.'

'I don't know if that's-'

'Aoi, listen.' his tone was firm, yet his eyes were sincere. 'I wish I had a more positive role in your life in terms of your last relationship, however disapproving I was of it. This time, I want to start off on the right foot with this young man. I want to get to know him, and I want to be there for you if anything happens.'

Aoi should have been ecstatic that her brother was expressing his desire to don a proactive position in her life, but she was completely put off by the sheer fact that *she had no boyfriend!* This was all a charade manufactured by Takeru's quick thinking and her own desperation to grasp onto any shred of hope that she wouldn't have to deal with an older guy she had no interest in.

'I know that I wasn't a supportive person to you last time.' Akira continued. 'But this time, I want to be better.'

'I don't know if that's-'

'Won't you give me that opportunity?' he was almost begging. 'You're my world, Aoi. I want to be there for you. And...' he smiled. 'I'm happy for you, that you were able to find someone.'

'Ah...'

'That is...' his expression darkened. 'If you really do have someone. You're not using him as a scapegoat to see Fujiki Yusaku again, are you?'

Aoi fought the urge to scream.

How was she going to get out of this mess?

'So I have good news for you!' Takeru declared with a smile as he sat down in front of Yusaku, who had his face buried in his hands in utter pain. The pair were seated on a wooden table by the school courtyard, where they were supposed to be having lunch. Silver-haired, always prepared Takeru unpacked the rice and fish he had prepared for himself the night before, but Yusaku was hopeless without Shoichi's hotdogs. Yusaku never actually packed any food for school, so he usually waited until after classes to satiate his hunger. Alternatively, he would eat before heading to campus if he had stayed over at the truck doing some work.

None of that mattered anyway, for Yusaku had no appetite today.

'Good news, huh?' Yusaku mumbled, propping his chin up on one palm. There were bags under his eyes and beads of sweat dotted his forehead. 'Haven't heard any of that in a while.'

Takeru winced. 'Hey... Are you alright? You look kinda-'

'Terrible?' Ai quipped. 'Horrendous? *Frightening*?'

'What colourful vocabulary!' Flame interjected. 'Perhaps I should upgrade my database to paint Takeru with such unflattering words!'

Takeru rolled his eyes. He knew that his Ignis wasn't joking.

'So...' Yusaku sighed. 'What's the good news?'

'Well, I finally figured out why Zaizen Aoi's been so down lately!'

'Oh.' Yusaku's stomach flipped sickeningly. Did Takeru actually speak to Aoi? More importantly, what had she told him? Yusaku might have been enthusiastic about Takeru investigating Aoi's mysterious mood in the beginning, but he was quickly regretting that decision now. What if she had revealed everything that transpired between them?

'Yeah!' Takeru beamed. 'Her brother was pressuring her to date his coworker!'

Yusaku's eyes widened.

'Wanna know how I found out, Yusaku? I saw her outside the campus with this older guy, maybe he was in his 30s? He kissed her and-'

Yusaku's face paled.

'-she didn't look like she wanted him to do that, so I stepped in. After the guy left, she told me that she was just dating him to please her brother, who apparently really wanted them to have a relationship-'

Yusaku was freaking out inside. Aoi was seeing someone else? Akira wanted his sister to get with this unknown man? This man kissed Aoi? Had they *been* kissing? Probably. *Shit*.

'A relationship?' Yusaku interrupted his friend.

'Uh-huh. Kind of sad, huh? What her brother's making her do, I mean. I feel really bad for her...'

'But you got him to leave, right?' Yusaku pressed, ignoring the part about Akira. 'Not just in that instance... But also to leave her alone in general?'

'For sure! I told the guy that I was Zaizen's boyfriend and he completely backed off!'

Silence befell the pair.

Takeru may have been unaware of the fact that the tension in the air was slowly building up. Upon hearing about this revelation that Takeru pretended to be Aoi's lover, even Ai froze for a few moments before glancing at its master, who was doing his best not to lose his temper. Emerald orbs were fixated on his partner, who was smiling back at him. How could Yusaku be pissed at Takeru? He was only trying to help.

But Yusaku was *beyond* pissed.

'*Wait*.' Yusaku grit his teeth. 'You pretended to be Aoi's boyfriend?'

'Haha...' Takeru laughed uncomfortably. 'It was all I could think of in the moment to get that guy to back away with no questions! Pretty dramatic though, huh?'

'Nevertheless, you put yourself out there.' Flame gave its master rare praise. 'Take pride in stepping out of your comfort zone to help a friend in need.'

'But you didn't have to pretend to be her *boyfriend*.' Yusaku insisted, visibly angry. 'That's going too far! What compelled you in that moment to even

think of using that as an excuse? You could have done so many other things to mitigate the situation!'

'Hey, back up.' Takeru raised his hands up to the level of his eyes to show surrender. 'Calm down. What's gotten you so worked up? I did what you asked me to do!'

'I'm just saying that it's suspicious that you'd even think to parade as her boyfriend.' Yusaku refused to let it go. 'Were you really just doing me a favour? Or do you have feelings for her, and this pseudo mission was just an excuse to get close to a girl you've secretly been pining for?'

'Yusaku, will you listen to yourself?! You're starting to sound crazy! I don't even *talk* to Zaizen!'

'Is that so? Because you've got some nerve declaring yourself to be the boyfriend of a girl you supposedly don't even talk to!'

'Man, quit it! What's wrong with you?!'

Yusaku opened his mouth to say something, but quickly sealed his lips and looked away. His posture was stiff and the muscles around his jaw were so tight that they were somewhat protruding, exposing their harshly masculine definition. He was never a smiler, but his stone-face cracked as he donned a deep scowl. Tension rose in the air and Takeru, despite his naivety, was slowly working out what was going on. Lavender eyes settled on Yusaku, who was trying his best not to lash out at the only person he truly considered a friend. The pair continued on in silence for a long time.

Takeru finally spoke, 'Yusaku... You like her, don't you? You like Zaizen.'

Yusaku didn't move. He didn't even acknowledge what Takeru had said, nor did he bother looking his way. He just kept staring straight ahead, at the random passers-by, at anything other than Takeru's knowing gaze. Normally, Yusaku was an expert at concealing his emotions. But whenever the topic revolved around Aoi, he couldn't seem to keep up his faux nonchalance. Added onto the fear he held deep inside that Aoi could leave

him for good in both the physical and emotion sense, and Yusaku was blindly motivated by anger. He was boiling inside, and he was starting to tear at the seams.

Now, even Takeru could see right through him.

How careless of me, Yusaku scolded himself, *Showcasing my emotions so freely...*

'Hey...' Takeru cleared his throat. 'It wasn't like that. I don't think of Zaizen that way.'

'I don't care.'

'It's so obvious that you do...'

Yusaku breathed out slowly. He finally mustered up the courage to look at his friend in the eye. 'I *don't* like Zaizen Aoi.' he said seriously. 'Not as a woman, and not even as a friend.'

Just then, Aoi's voice waltzed into the once-private conversation.

'Um... Excuse me.' she murmured.

Shocked, both Yusaku and Takeru turned their heads to the side to see none other than Akira's little sister. How long had she been there?

She was standing completely, perfectly straight as she usually does, and her facial expression was unreadable. Her gaze briefly met Yusaku's before she averted her eyes. But that short, split second of eye contact was enough to send her heart racing. She anticipated that Takeru was probably having lunch with Yusaku, but she didn't think that seeing her ex-lover again would stimulate such a painful reaction. Furthermore, she didn't think that she would have to hear him once more devalue her presence in his life. Not as a woman nor as a friend? She couldn't decide if she wanted to punch him in the face or run away. Her chest felt like it was being torn apart.

On the other hand, Yusaku felt hollowed out. It was like his entire stomach cavity had been drained and he was now an empty shell. He felt the blood rush to his head. *Shit*. Aoi most likely heard what he just said. He shouldn't have minded since it was his goal to continue pushing her away, but he knew that those words must have hurt her deeply. Still, what was he to do? Apologize? Takeru would only become more suspicious of his true intentions, and he didn't want to give Aoi false hope that they could ever reconcile.

Still, it was agonizing being in the same space as her without being able to express how he felt about her.

'A-Ah... Z-Zaizen!' Takeru laughed uncomfortably. Armed with the knowledge that Yusaku was into this girl, Takeru suddenly felt very awkward speaking to her. 'W-Wha-'

'Sorry to bother you, but may I please speak to you?' she continued, trying her best to ignore Yusaku. 'Takeru-kun?'

At those words, Yusaku shot Takeru a hard glare. 'Go ahead.' he snipped venomously. 'I think we're just about done with lunch anyway.'

'U-Uh, sure!' Takeru squeaked, all too aware that Yusaku was burning holes into the back of his head as he stood up and walked away from the scene with Aoi. With a sigh, Takeru resigned to the fact that he would most likely have to be more involved in this situation than he already was. Plus, he had to explain to Yusaku that there was absolutely nothing going on between himself and Aoi, no matter how intimate they seemed right now.

'Thank you.' Aoi whispered after a while. 'For saving me the other day.'

'You're welcome. I'm glad I was able to help. Are you alright, though?'

'Huh?'

'I mean, that guy was a creep... And you were so obviously not into it, that it got me worried for you.'

Aoi smiled. 'You were worried about me? That's so sweet.'

Despite himself, Takeru blushed. It wasn't everyday that he was being thanked for doing something chivalrous. 'No problem.'

'But... I might need your help again.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah.' Aoi stopped in her tracks and so did her companion. She then turned to face him with an adorably pitiful expression. Takeru decided then and there that it wasn't difficult to see why Yusaku was interested in her. 'My Onii-sama doesn't really believe I have a boyfriend. If I come clean, then I might have to see that guy again...'

'Oh...' Takeru suffered a bout of anxiety. He knew where this was going.

'You don't have to accept, but... If it's not too much trouble, would you mind having dinner with us? Just once, so that he's convinced?'

Takeru rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. 'If you had asked me yesterday, I would have accepted, but...'

'But?'

'I mean, what's going on with you and Yusaku?'

As if burnt, Aoi recoiled sharply. Her eyes widened and for just a fraction of a second, her icy demeanour melted to reveal the spirit of a broken, wounded girl. Just as quickly as she had faltered, she regained her senses and reverted back to her stoic persona. 'It's whatever he told you.' she said firmly.

'He didn't tell me anything.'

She scoffed. 'Like I'll believe that...'

'Really.' he insisted. 'He didn't tell me anything. I was just telling him about what happened with your brother's friend yesterday, and he suddenly got really angry with me.'

'I heard him... He told you that I'm essentially a nobody to him. And that's as far as it goes.'

'I don't buy it.'

Aoi didn't respond.

Takeru didn't give up, 'Are you guys secretly dating?'

'No... Nothing like that.'

'Then what-'

'He thinks I'm *garbage*.' she blurted out shakily. 'So... Whatever happened doesn't matter because *I* don't matter.'

Takeru was stunned into brief silence. Before he could say anything, Aoi ran off ahead of him and he knew that she didn't want him to chase after her.

Thanks everyone for your support in this story and for wishing me well! I'm feeling tons better, especially now that the weather has cooled a bit. Thanks for your encouraging words!

If you have an account, I have already responded to you privately! Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you for your review! Yes, you will definitely be reading about Ai's reactions, alongside Yusaku's.

Guest, Takeru currently has no feelings for Aoi! Though he is caught in between helping Aoi out and keeping out of Yusaku's line of fire. Yusaku is most certainly angry and jealous, but he does a terrible job

of hiding it. And thank you so much as well for reading my oneshots! Really grateful for your support!

Yujo0147, Yusaku will definitely be confronting Aoi soon. Aoi's feelings will be explored in later chapters, but more of the focus will be on a secret that she's keeping that hasn't been revealed yet. Thank you so much for your continued support and your well wishing!

Aniki, glad you found humour in it! I try to incorporate some funny scenes to take a break from the dark material but it's difficult for me to do so. So your words are really encouraging! You also absolutely hit the nail on the head with how you interpreted the characters. Thank you so much for your continued support and well wishing!

Guest, I would love to answer your questions but I can't do so without significantly spoiling the story! Thank you for your review and well wishing!

19. The Deepest Secret

'I really don't know if I should go to the Zaizens' tonight...'

'You should do it.' Yusaku forced himself to speak calmly. Inside, he was livid and envious - but he wasn't about to let that show. Besides, logically, he believed that it was better for Takeru to continue having this pseudo-relationship with Aoi, if only so that Yusaku could have some insight onto how she was doing and feeling. Try as he might to conceal it, he deeply cared for Aoi.

'You say that, but...' Takeru winced. 'You look at me like you want to beat the shit out of me.'

'Not at all.' he lied.

'How convincing...'

'I mean, think about it this way: free food.' Yusaku smiled. 'That's always nice.'

That earned a chuckle from Takeru. It was a relief that Yusaku could joke about this situation. 'Ha... Yeah. Probably good food too, since the address she gave me is from one of those neighbourhoods with the pretentious high-rises.'

'Right. I doubt they'd serve you hot dogs.'

'No, I don't think that they would.'

At that casual exchange of words, the atmosphere between the two youths seemed to become more comfortable. Yusaku's cold, ominously green gaze warmed slightly, and the muscles around his jaw were no longer so prominent. He internally scolded himself for being so aggressive towards Takeru. After all, his friend was only trying to help. Added onto the fact that Yusaku never actually disclosed his history with Aoi to anyone, and it was becoming more difficult to justify wanting to slit Takeru's throat open.

Takeru himself wondered earlier on if he was going to make it out of this hour with Yusaku alive. After all, they were currently in Yusaku's apartment, so Takeru could totally disappear and be cut up into a million pieces and no one would ever find out.

Of course, he didn't deserve that.

Takeru was just being a nice guy. Why shit on the *nice guy*?

'So...' Takeru cleared his throat, more confident now that his companion was somewhat more relaxed. 'Are you ever gonna tell me what happened between you and Zaizen?'

Yusaku sighed. He knew that this question was going to come up sooner or later. Although he was a secretive person, he often made an exception for close people in his life. And even when he divulged information that he liked to keep under lock and key, he would purposely do so in a flippant manner to give off the impression that it wasn't a big deal. But in the case of his complicated relationship with Aoi, he had failed to conceal the emotion in his heart when he snapped at Takeru yesterday. Besides, how could he even begin to explain himself? Aoi wasn't his girlfriend, but he was stupidly in love with her, and hopeless in his desire for her. She loved him, but there was a fear etched deep into the scarred cuts of his heart that prevented him from boldly returning those feelings. Furthermore, all he ever did seemed to hurt her, so it was unfathomable to him why she still insisted on being held by him, on being raw and passionate in his arms. They were both confused and confusing. That, essentially, was what was going on with himself and Aoi.

Now *that* was a mouthful.

'It didn't work out.' Yusaku decided on a few simple words to summarize his situation.

'And why is that?'

'I just don't think we're compatible.'

Takeru nodded slowly, as if trying to physically absorb the words he just heard. Light, lavender eyes settled on the floor beneath. He was in deep thought, trying to construct a response that would not aggravate the quick-to-piss-off Yusaku. Finally, he spoke, 'She... She told me something.'

Yusaku narrowed his eyes. 'Oh?'

'Mhmm... She said that you think that she's garbage.'

'That's *not* true.' Yusaku was livid. 'I think she's a great girl, it's just...'

'What?'

'Look.' he sighed. 'She has needs that I can't satisfy, and I'm not interested in a relationship. It's just bad business.'

'But it feels like you're hiding something. You say that you don't want to be with her, but then why did you have me talk to her in the first place?'

'I was just curious.'

'*Curious*? You don't even have the balls to say that you care about her?' Takeru was frustrated with his comrade's blasé attitude towards a woman that was irrefutably in love with him.

'I don't know what you want me to say!' Yusaku snapped. 'It doesn't matter how I feel about her because I don't want to be with her. And too much has happened between her and me for it to *ever* work out. Sure, I care about her, but indulging in a make-believe notion of romance isn't going to do anyone any favours. I *like* being alone. It's easier. You get that, don't you?' he stared into Takeru's eyes with a serious gaze. 'It's easier.'

At that, Takeru looked away. Yes, he understood precisely what Yusaku was talking about. After everything that happened throughout the Lost Incident and the subsequent events that followed for the victims and their families, it was difficult if not impossible to entrust one's heart to another human being ever again. Hence, many victims like himself and Yusaku only truly formed

close connections with each other - because of some unspoken solidarity through shared trauma. Anyone else was an outsider that held the potential to inflict the same pain that the Hanoi did.

Aoi may love Yusaku, but she completely fails to understand him. She seeks love *despite* trauma, but Yusaku is unable to untangle himself from his past. Thus, the love he desires is one that heals, and Aoi was inadvertently pushing her own emotional weight on him instead of alleviating the sting of his wounds. She makes an effort to relieve the physical symptoms of his heartbreak, but she was pushing him further away in spirit. She wanted him to be emotionally available, hence she takes his hesitancy to open up to her as rejection. She then exposes herself to him and mistakenly showcases how hurt she is that he doesn't immediately reciprocate her feelings, which then frightens Yusaku as he believes that she isn't stable enough to be a suitable parter. The last thing Yusaku wanted to do was be responsible for another human being.

Takeru understood that. It was just as Yusaku said: it was all just bad business. Unfortunatel circumstances. Incompatibility. Factors no one could really control.

'Regardless, you should talk to her.' Takeru eventually said. 'For closure. She deserves that.'

'I should.' Yusaku agreed. 'But not right now.'

'Alright.'

'Anyway...' Yusaku wanted to change topics. 'You need to prepare some lies to use tonight.'

'Huh? Like what?'

'Like how you and Aoi met, what you like about her, all that stuff... It's important. Zaizen Akira is an insightful man. He'll grill you, I'm sure of it. If you aren't committed to this charade, you're not going to fool him.'

Takeru dragged a palm down his face. 'Oh, come on! How am I supposed to make that shit up?!'

'It's easy.'

'Well, what do *you* like about Zaizen?' Takeru raised a brow. 'Since you're the one with some history with her.'

'For one, she's *hot*.' Yusaku emphasized the last word as if it were painfully obvious. 'Two, she's a nice, polite girl. She's kind. Three...' he thought about it for a moment.

Those reasons are kind of shallow, Takeru thought to himself.

'She does what she wants, no matter what anyone says.' Yusaku finished with a faraway look in his eyes. 'She's well-meaning, but when it comes to her own honour, she's not afraid to step on other people's toes. She steps on *my* toes. She's got guts.' a small smile played on his lips. 'I like that.'

'Sounds masochistic.'

Yusaku shot his friend a hard glare. 'You asked.'

'Mhmm... I did.' Takeru murmured to himself as he made his way to Yusaku's mini-fridge, which was beside the washing machine. Without asking permission (he was always welcome to take what he liked anyway - Yusaku made that clear), he took out a bottle of water and sipped on it. There was a moment of silence before he spoke again, 'Yusaku... If you like her, I won't do this dinner. That's fucked up.'

'I *don't* like her.'

'I don't think that's true.'

'You can fuck her right in front of me and I wouldn't give a damn.'

Takeru whistled ironically. 'Listen, I know you're the king of aggressive exposition and an expert at pushing people away, but seriously, you're going

to regret the words you say one day. What if Zaizen actually found someone she liked? And you'd have to see them almost every day at school, being couple-y? Won't that sting?'

'I have been through so much.' Yusaku sighed. 'That nothing honestly hurts me anymore. Besides...' his gaze turned soft. 'I'm not the right guy for her.'

'That's not for you to decide.'

'I can't be there for her, Takeru.' he admitted. 'She's just... She's too much work. I don't have the time or energy for her.'

Dinner at the Zaizens' was nothing short of spectacular.

The robot maid that greeted Takeru on his way in was equipped with the latest AI software and was a custom model. It was bigger than most models, and had a more diverse range of motion. The dining room was impeccably clean and adorned with expensive furniture. He almost felt guilty sitting on such an intricately designed chair. Even the wooden table was so smooth, he wondered if it was truly from an actual tree or was in fact steel painted with artistic precision. And the food: oh goodness, where could he start with the food? Top-grade red meat, buttery potatoes, and a lot of stuff Takeru couldn't recognize but thoroughly enjoyed was all laid out right in front of him.

'Serve him a glass.' Akira commanded the robot, motioning for it to pour Takeru a helping of bordeaux wine. 'He'll like it.'

'Um...' Takeru laughed uncomfortably. 'I'm underage.'

'What, you think I'm going to get you drunk? You insult me. I just want you to have a good experience. It goes well with the steak.'

Takeru glanced at Aoi to seek approval, but she was preoccupied with picking at food she wasn't even eating. He thought it was strange that she had no appetite, especially with such delicious dishes available to her - but

he decided that perhaps she just was nervous. This was all a facade, after all.

'Aoi doesn't mind.' Akira quipped, suspecting that Takeru didn't want to make Aoi feel unsettled. 'Do you, Aoi?'

'I don't care.' she said flatly.

Akira wanted to scold her for being so uninterested, but decided against it. The last thing he needed was to scare off this new suitor, especially since he was actually liking this young boy. Takeru had manners, and he was well-groomed to a fault. His uniform was buttoned up all the way and wasn't ill-fitting at all. He even paired his clothes with dress shoes, which were undoubtedly painful but a sign that he cared about his presentation - a trait that Akira appreciated. 'Tell me, Takeru-kun, what is it that you like about my little sister?'

'H-Huh?!' Takeru's jaw dropped.

Aoi finally looked up. Her heart dropped. This was it. Her brother was going to find out that she was lying. Takeru was going to blow it for her.

'I don't mean to put you on the spot, but surely you can understand my curiosity.' Akira smiled tightly. 'At any rate, it should be easy for you to explain your interest in her to me. If you truly like her, that is.'

'Well...' the student caught his breath. His heart was beating incredibly fast. He thought that he might die of anxiety. Aoi was counting on him and although they weren't friends per se, he valued her as one of the heroes that helped take down the Hanoi. He didn't want to let down someone he respected. 'That's...'

'Don't be shy.' Akira insisted. 'Go on.'

'Onii-sama, how about we just-'

'She's pretty.' Takeru blurted, remembering the three reasons for liking Aoi that Yusaku cited earlier. 'And... And she's nice. And...'

Yusaku had that faraway look in his eyes as he revealed the last reason, like he was dreaming and didn't want to wake up. 'Three...'

'And she does what she wants, when she wants to.' Takeru finished. 'She... She's her own person, and she's not afraid to let anyone know that. Even me.'

Silence ensued. Akira was staring intently at his junior, calculating, violet orbs revealing nothing of his innermost thoughts. Despite herself, Aoi felt her heart flutter at Takeru's words. Not because she was interested in him romantically, but because she had never heard someone say such nice things about her. He said that she was beautiful and kind and *gutsy*. Did she really come across that way? She would love to be the person that Takeru described, but too often, she felt like a disgusting, depraved girl who had no control of her life, constantly oppressed by her brother, who she loved more than anything.

She wishes she could be the woman Takeru supposedly sees.

'That's sweet.' Akira finally said. 'Good to know that Aoi is with a man who notices her best qualities.'

The rest of the dinner went by smoothly. Akira had no other questions for his little sister's pseudo-boyfriend, and even Aoi seemed to relax a bit. She knew that the hardest part was over and that she was in the clear. Nevertheless, she made a mental note to ask Takeru about what he had said.

At the end of the evening, when Takeru bid the Zaizens farewell, Aoi offered to accompany her classmate down to the lobby. Akira agreed, thinking that Aoi wanted to give her partner a kiss and that she was uncomfortable doing so in the presence of family. Once within the confines of the elevator walls, a great weight lifted off of her shoulders and she breathed a sigh of relief.

'Thank you.' she whispered. 'For doing this. Onii-sama doesn't suspect a thing.'

'You're welcome. I just wanted to help.'

'Yeah...' she shifted her weight on her feet, unsure of how to ask what was on her mind. 'By the way...'

'Hmm?'

'What was that earlier?'

'Hm?' Takeru tilted his head quizzically. 'What do you mean?'

'You know, that whole thing about...' she paused. 'About qualities of me that you liked.'

The heat rushed to Takeru's face.

Aoi pressed, 'Those weren't your words, were they?'

'Ha... You figured it out, huh?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Before I came over, I spoke to Yusaku.' Takeru admitted. Aoi's posture stiffened as a reaction to that confession. 'I asked him to help me out. I was so nervous about tonight... I hardly know you. How am I supposed to know the first thing about you? So Yusaku told me three reasons why he liked you, and I thought of them when your brother asked.'

'Those were Yusaku's words?'

Aoi shamelessly believed Takeru. Although she'd been burnt too many times by her former flame, she was at this point grasping for straws for any sort of closure to what was single-handedly the most fucked up relationship she's ever had with another human being. If the only way she was going to get some peace was to go by hearsay, then so be it.

It's not like this revelation encouraged her to continue her pursuit of Yusaku's attention. Truthfully, it only made it clearer to her why Yusaku could never actually like her back. In his head, he had an image of a dream girl; pretty and sweet and confident. Aoi believed she was none of those things. Perhaps the more Yusaku got to know her, the more he realized that. And that was why he was pushing her away aggressively.

Aoi was convinced of this.

'I'm gonna go.' Takeru declared as the elevator doors parted to reveal the lobby. 'Thanks for dinner.'

'Thanks for saving me.' she smiled. 'Bye now.'

'Hey, don't be so cold! Give me a hug!' he opened his arms and stepped towards her. Shocked, Aoi was complacent when he wrapped his arms around and pulled her into a tight embrace. The gesture warmed her ailing heart. Overcome with gratitude for Takeru's display of friendly affection, she nuzzled her face into his chest. Her hands found their way up his back and she fisted the fabric of his uniform. Takeru could feel her trembling. 'Stop trying to carry your burden alone.' he murmured into her hair. 'I know we aren't close, but... I'm always here for you.'

'That's so sweet.' she replied shakily. 'Thank you.'

Fearing that the interaction may become awkward if prolonged, Aoi pulled away. Her eyes met Takeru's, and she offered him a smile. He mirrored her expression and made his way out of the elevator. 'Come to lunch with Yusaku and me tomorrow.' he called over his shoulder. 'I'll pick you up from class. Fifth with Sakaki, right?'

'Um, that's-'

'No excuses! I'll be waiting outside your classroom.'

Aoi had no chance to respond as the doors closed in front of her. On the way up to her apartment, she leaned against the steel wall and palmed her

womb, over a secret that she dare not reveal to a single soul. A flurry of emotions washed over her, including the panic that had plagued her earlier in the week that she had desperately suppressed. The idea of seeing Yusaku again triggered the thoughts that she kept at the back of her head, the unforgiving fear that ate her up inside.

He'd never forgive me if he knew, she thought painfully, *But... What am I going to do?*

The hand over her womb trembled.

I'm scared.

Hey guys, thank you so much for supporting me thus far in this story! I was overwhelmed by the reception last chapter. I also am seeing a lot of questions/confusion, so I will definitely try to update faster so that the plot becomes clearer.

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Aniki, Aoi certainly seems to have the worst timing in this story! Yusaku and Aoi may not have a shouting match in the near future, but there will be a tense confrontation. Thank you so much for your continued support!

Guest, there will certainly be tense moments between Yusaku and Takeru, but I don't foresee violence between them in this story! Thank you so much for your review!

Guest, yes, Akira is generally suspicious of Aoi. Although he loves her, it's true that he doesn't trust her. And Takeru and Aoi's relationship (however it will go) will certainly lead to more development with Yusaku, which then allows him to have a healthier relationship with Aoi. Thank you for your review!

Guest, Takeru will be trying to play cupid, but ultimately, it is up to Yusaku to pursue Aoi. Thank you so much for your review!

Yujo0147, that's an accurate description of what is going on between them in this story. The only thing that can patch them up is to learn healthy ways of negotiating their relationship, which is the trajectory of the plot soon! Thank you so much for your continued support!

Guest, thank you for your review! And I'm glad that this story helps with English. Although that surprises me as I don't feel that I have the best command of it, as it is not my primary language.

Finally, poetrymagic12 has asked that I mention their new story, Detective Files. It's an AU Yusaku x Aoi story that features Yusaku as a detective, and Aoi as his attractive client. The two fail to adhere to a professional environment and begin a sexual relationship. It's a great read, and I know that you'll enjoy their story just as much as I do!

20. Go Forward

Yusaku was busy typing away at his laptop on a random bench somewhere along the school campus. It was time for all the students' lunch time, but he rarely ate during this hour. He either didn't have an appetite, was too focused on finishing his work, or too lazy to prepare anything the night before so resigned to toughing it out until Shoichi offered him a free hot dog after classes.

He also didn't make a big deal out of lunch like most of his classmates did. *Who are we eating with? Where are we eating? What's in your bento?* Those were all shreds of conversation that were lost on Yusaku. If someone wanted to eat with him, they knew exactly where to find him: on this fucking bench. Which was probably why Yusaku never bothered texting Takeru about where to meet him, since the latter always knew anyway. It was just expected between the two of them now that they would join each other for food at this time.

What Yusaku never anticipated was that Takeru would bring *company*... Least of all, Aoi Zaizen.

Imagine his surprise when from the corner of his eye, Yusaku caught a glimpse of Takeru walking towards him accompanied by that very same woman he was secretly obsessing over.

Yusaku's jaw dropped.

'Oh my gawd!' Ai squeaked from its master's Duel Disk. 'That's her!'

Snapping his mouth back shut, Yusaku shoved his Duel Disk into his bag, earning a pitiful yelp from the Ignis. He flipped his laptop before pondering what to do next. Takeru waved with faux excitement even though it was evident that he was as nervous as Yusaku and Aoi probably were. Yusaku narrowed his eyes. *You are so fucking dead,* he thought, hoping that he could telepathically let Takeru in on the fact that he was slowly killing him with his mind. Well, there was no need for that... Takeru was aware of it,

but he feigned ignorance. He invited Aoi here, which meant that he had to at least pretend to be confident about it.

But Aoi was starting to feel the crushing weight of anxiety on her shoulders. Her steps became slower, and she trailed behind Takeru rather than beside him.

'Hey...' he whispered to her with a smile. 'What's wrong?'

'I can't do this.' she admitted. 'I can't face him. I-'

'Yes, you can.'

'No, please, I-'

'Come *on*.' he reached behind and took hold of her hand. He gave her a reassuring squeeze.

Upon seeing that, Yusaku felt a streak of jealousy shoot up his spine. Worse still, the crestfallen expression on Aoi's face when she saw him ignited a deeply buried guilt that he tried to suppress all this time. By now, Yusaku realized that his emotional abuse against her had done a number on her. He only wanted to push her away. The intention was never to hurt her to the point where she couldn't even look at him. But now that this was the case, Yusaku couldn't deny that he felt nothing but regret for the way he treated her.

He never intended for Aoi to *hate* him.

'Hey, Yusaku.' Takeru laughed to ease the tension in the air once he sat down on the bench, right across from Yusaku. Aoi took a seat beside Takeru, but her eyes were glued to the wooden surface in front of her. She could feel her former lover looking at her intently, but she didn't have the confidence to meet his gaze. Sensing this, Takeru cleared his throat, 'I invited Zaizen to join us today. You don't mind, do you?'

'No.' he replied tightly. 'I don't.'

Takeru sighed. 'You might want to sound more convincing...'

Yusaku didn't say anything back, but continued staring at Aoi, who was still avoiding meeting his eyes. He knew that if he didn't bridge the gap soon that the rest of the hour was going to be as arduous as trekking up a steep hill. 'Zaizen Aoi.' Yusaku greeted her, though his deep voice came across as if he were scolding her. *That sounded so rough*, he winced.

Despite Yusaku's hostile demeanour, Takeru was surprised to observe a bright gleam in his friend's eye. More so than that, Takeru was pleasantly shocked by the fact that it took almost no time for Yusaku to acknowledge Aoi's presence, and that he was the first to do so. Takeru thought for certain that today was going to turn out in such a way that Aoi would try to chip away at Yusaku's iciness, only to be rebuffed by a freezing-cold shoulder.

'Fujiki Yusaku-kun.' Aoi returned, finally raising her head to properly look at him. Worried, frightened hazels met unreadable emerald and they were both starstruck at the first moment of eye contact they've had in a long while. Immediately, Aoi's heart picked up its pace to the point where she felt like the organ would punch through her chest. Unbeknownst to her, Yusaku was experiencing the same phenomenon in his own body. The only thing he wanted to do was reach out to hold her and beg for forgiveness that he didn't deserve. It was taking all his strength to remain composed.

Takeru breathed a sigh of relief. Looks like this wasn't going to be so bad after all...

So, then...

'I need to run.' Takeru stood up abruptly. Yusaku shot him a menacing glare, but he ignored it. 'You guys have fun.'

'Where the hell are you going?' Yusaku snapped.

'I need to speak to a teacher.' he lied. Then, he glanced at Aoi and flashed her an encouraging smile. Aoi returned it, but her hands were trembling

slightly. Nevertheless, Takeru was confident that she could handle being alone with Yusaku. 'You two have fun.'

Not wanting to add fuel to and already potentially disastrous fire, Yusaku didn't object. He simply nodded his head, and Aoi bid Takeru farewell. When they were finally alone, neither one of them spoke up for the longest time. Yusaku was trying to figure out the best course of action in his head. He just had to survive the next hour, right? That didn't sound impossible. Besides, he was wondering how Aoi was doing. This was a good chance to catch up with her.

Yusaku cleared his throat bravely. 'How have you been?'

'Good.' Aoi whispered back. 'And yourself?'

'Good.'

'That's... That's good.'

Yusaku screamed internally at how awkward this situation was. It was always awkward with Aoi unless they were rolling around in bed, but this was a whole new level of social anxiety. He tried to strategize how to best proceed. Their short exchange of words didn't pave well for more topics, but he could start a new one. But what could they talk about? How was he supposed to act friendly with someone he had hurt?

She said that you think that she's garbage.

She thinks that you think she's a slut.

He wanted to address all of those assumptions and clear his name, but he didn't know how to do that without opening up old wounds. He knew it was going to be a difficult conversation, but he had to let her know that he thought nothing but the best of her. But how was he going to do that? More specifically, how was he supposed to convince her of that when he had told her that he wanted to forget about her after he handed her a contraceptive

pill the morning following the evening wherein he confessed that he *loved* her?

Yusaku felt like throwing up.

But before he could say anything, Aoi spoke.

'I'm sorry.' she said softly. 'For forcing my feelings onto you before. You tried telling me so many times that you don't feel the same way, but I ignored you and kept on trying anyway. That must have been uncomfortable for you. I'm sorry for putting you in that position.'

Yusaku was taken aback. He didn't expect aoi to talk at all, let alone give an apology that didn't even make total sense. Sure, it wasn't very considerate of her to insist on her feelings for him, but he also encouraged them. He may have tried to drive her away with words, but he welcomed any chance to be intimate with her. And he knew that it was impossible to hide his passion in his actions. So really, how could he blame her for trying so hard for them to work together? Though Aoi wasn't entirely faultless, the bulk of the blame was undeniably on himself.

'No, I...' Yusaku began. 'I'm sorry that I treated you so poorly.'

'Thanks.' she returned, but Yusaku wasn't at all convinced that she took his own apology sincerely.

'I'm sorry.' he repeated. 'I really am.'

She waved a hand dismissively. 'Water under the bridge. Let's move on.'

'But if it *isn't* water under the bridge for you, then you need to tell me.' he insisted. 'If you still hurt because of me, or if you want some closure... Tell me. I'll give it to you.'

Tell me what you want, baby. Tell me and I'll give you anything.

Aoi's visage paled. She just wanted this topic to be over with already. Who cares if she was in pain? He certainly didn't. She knew that for a fact, despite his efforts at trying to dispel that. 'It's fine.' she maintained. 'Let's not talk about it anymore. Besides, weren't you the one who said that you just wanted to forget about it?'

'I'm sorry.' he lowered his voice to a soothing octave. 'I didn't mean that, I-'

'Aren't you going to eat?' she interjected, clearly hellbent on moving on from the conversation.

Yusaku sighed. He wasn't going to win, and Aoi herself said that it was all said and done, then there was nothing more he could do. From now on, all he could do was treat her with kindness although he wasn't entirely sure that he knew how to do that.

So long as they weren't *in love*, then there was no harm in having her in his life.

Right?

'I don't really eat during lunch.' he confessed. 'And you? You're not eating either.'

'I'm the same way.'

'I see...' he trailed off. A heavy silence befell them, and he made the first move to break it. And perhaps gratuitously as well, as there was something in his mind that was bothering him. 'So... I heard you were seeing someone?'

Aoi stiffened.

'Takeru told me.' he continued. 'That you were with someone.'

'It was nothing.' she said tightly. 'But that's none of your business.'

Yusaku was miffed by her response, but resolved not to show it. His hands tightened into his fists and painful words were begging to leave his mouth, but he refused to hurt Aoi again.

Just then, she keeled over and buried her face in her hands. A low groan escaped her.

'Hey...' Yusaku was worried. 'Are you alright?'

'Yeah... Fine.'

'You don't look it.'

'I'm just sick. Maybe it's the flu.' she huffed, strangely irritated by his panic. 'That's all this is.'

He didn't know what to say to that, so he wracked his brains for something he could do. Should he get her water? Rub her back? No, she probably wouldn't like him touching her. What about-

'You can't even hide it.' she bit out icily. 'I see how much you hate what I could be.'

She confused him for a second, but Yusaku quickly worked out what she was implying.

'I wasn't thinking that you might be pregnant.' he clarified, suddenly very anxious. 'But if you were, my first reaction wouldn't be to let you feel like I hated you.'

'I already feel like you hate me.'

Yusaku's heart dropped. 'I don't.'

'Stop.'

'Aoi...'

'Stop talking.' she hissed, clutching her head. 'Your voice is grating. I-' she jerked, and one hand covered her mouth.

Yusaku's nervousness was reaching unbearable levels. Though he gave her the contraceptive, he was aware that if she was already pregnant before that, then the pill would do nothing. They had forgone protection numerous times. It was well within the realm of possibility for her to be with child.

'Aoi... Have you gotten checked?'

Her eyes flew to his, wide and frightened.

'I will.' she lied.

She already had.

'Do you want me to go with you?'

'No...' she tucked a lock of hair behind an ear. 'I'll be fine.'

I won't be fine. I'm freaking out. I've never felt more alone.

'Besides...' she continued. 'It doesn't concern you.'

'It absolutely *does*.'

'Yusaku... I'm not pregnant. Stop being dumb.'

'I'm not being dumb. It's a possibility.'

'No, it's not. Just drop it.'

Another long silence cursed the pair.

This was, single-handedly, the most uncomfortably intense conversation either of them had ever had.

'If I were pregnant, I'd just terminate it.' she bluffed. 'That's what you want, right?'

Yusaku didn't say anything for the longest time, but he stared at her with smouldering green orbs that hid all thought. He was undecipherable. It was making Aoi nervous. Had she hit the nail on the head? Is that why he wasn't speaking to her anymore?

She quickly tucked her hands under the table so that her companion wouldn't see them. They were shaking. But her expression was unbroken. She didn't want Yusaku to know that she was hurting inside. She could do this alone.

She had to. He wanted nothing to do with it.

Yusaku leaned in and reached across the table to offer his hand. She didn't take it.

That *stung*. But he refused to be pushed away so easily.

He withdrew his arm and said, 'If you were pregnant, I wouldn't leave you.'

But you were never with me.

'I'd want to know.' he continued. 'And I want to support you in any decision you make.'

The fact that he didn't confirm or deny her allegation gave her all the certainty she needed.

He wanted her to get rid of it.

But... she didn't want to.

'I'm not pregnant.' she declared shakily. 'Just stop talking about it already.'

'Aoi.' he said sternly. 'Get yourself tested. I'll go with you.'

'If I am, I'll just take something.' her breathing became unsteady. 'So don't worry about.'

He inhaled sharply before asking, 'Is that what you want?'

'Who cares.'

'I'd support whatever your decision is.' he fronted, though the idea of Aoi actually having his baby was enough to push him over the edge of panic. Nevertheless, he wasn't going to show her that. He had already pushed too much of himself onto her. He stood up from his seat and made his way to her, sitting down right beside her. She scooted away, thinking that he wanted to maintain space between them, but he closed the distance and wrapped an arm around her waist. His hand subsequently laid on her abdomen, and Aoi almost cried at how ironic this position was.

If he knew, he'd lose it.

There was no way she could come clean.

He pulled her closer up to him, until their bodies were pressed together. Aoi's heartbeat sped up and she felt dizzy again for an entirely different reason. She was overcome with emotion, but she wasn't going to act on them. She knew that vying for Yusaku's affection was just going to hurt her again. So she remained completely still, rigid in his arms, not daring to move an inch.

'I'm sorry.'

Aoi looked up to meet Yusaku's eyes. 'Stop saying it. I know you don't mean it.'

'I'm sorry. I really am.' he repeated for the umpteenth that hour, emerald saturated with sincerity. 'I'm very sorry for the way that I treated you. But I really would be around for you, if you'll allow me to help you.'

'I don't need you.' her tone trembled.

'I know.' he tucked her head under his chin. Being so close to his neck, she could smell his subtle cologne. She wanted to embrace him, but settled for palming his chest. The contact was painfully sweet. She was still in love with him, but was too exhausted to bother with it anymore. She hated him, but couldn't bring herself to push him away completely. These conflicting sentiments ate her up inside. But for now, she was shamelessly thankful for this strange moment of kindness from him.

She should tell him. She knew that.

But not today. Not right now.

Why ruin this moment?

'Yusaku... People can see us.'

'That's fine.'

Aoi shut her eyelids. He was so warm.

'Hey...' he whispered into her hair lovingly, emotionally loose from the powerful elation of being with her peacefully. 'You should join me again for lunch. Tomorrow.'

A weight lifted off of Aoi's shoulders. 'Is that what you want?'

Yusaku didn't even hesitate. 'Yes. That's what I want.'

Hey guys! Thank you for your support in this story. I truly cannot thank you guys enough for all the encouragement you give me.

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Yujo0147, Takeru hugged Aoi because he felt that it was the best way to convey his compassion to her. And the lunch didn't end badly at all,

and Yusaku and Aoi's relationship will be smooth sailing for the most part moving forward! Thank you so much for your continued support!

Aniki, the idea of Aoi being important to another human being is precisely why she isn't 100% against her pregnancy. You are absolutely right. Thank you so much for your continued support!

Guest, you successfully guessed it! All your questions will be answered and thank you so much for your review and support in this story!

Ichigo, thank you so much! Your review is so kind and I'm glad that you notice these details. Thanks a lot!

21. Different

'She's fucking pregnant.'

'How do you know?' Ai asked from its master's Duel Disk, which was on top of his desk. Yusaku was busy pacing his room back and forth, trying desperately alleviate himself of the perpetual anxiety boiling inside of him ever since he and Aoi met as a result of Takeru's meddling. Normally, he wouldn't dream of opening up the topic with his Ignis, but he had absolutely no one to talk to - and though he never wanted to admit it, he *really* needed someone to speak to right now.

'One, she implied it. There was no motive for her to do so unless she wanted to plant that idea in my head, which she has successfully done.' he explained. 'Two, she was feeling sick, which could be symptomatic of pregnancy. And three...' he rubbed his face, ashamed and defeated. 'I...'

For the first time in his life, Yusaku's face managed to turn bright red.

'I-I...'

'You were irresponsible and had unprotected sex.' Ai finished for him.

Yusaku groaned and sat down in front of Ai, beyond embarrassed to hear it out loud. He folded his arms on the wooden surface and buried his face in his limbs. Sex without a condom? How fucking stupid. Why didn't he just wrap it up? If he had been careful from the beginning, then none of this would have happened. He wished that he never experienced being inside of Aoi *without* a condom. It was *too good to quit*. When he finally did have enough self-control to wear a condom, so much of the enjoyable sensation was lost.

But *still*.

He was so *fucking stupid*!

'I'm an idiot.'

'Aww, it's OK, Yusaku-chan!' Ai patted Yusaku's head. 'At least it was fun in the moment, right?'

'Shut up.'

'Not then... You're so used to calling the shots, but what will you do now? Playmaker-sama?'

Yusaku sat up and massaged his temples. What *will* he do now? That was a good question, with no good answer. Aoi wasn't even comfortable confessing her body's state to him right now either. All he could really do at this point was remain in the sidelines until Aoi decided to let him in. And he oh, so desperately wanted for her to just trust him again. Especially now, at a time when she shouldn't be so alone.

'What will you tell Aoi-chan to do?'

Yusaku frowned. 'What are you talking about? I have no intention of dictating her next course of action.'

'Ah... You're OK with having a baby?'

'No!' he hissed too quickly. 'That would ruin my life!'

'OK. Then tell her to get rid of it.'

'*No*.' he hung his head fisted his hair. *Motherfucker*. What a fucking nightmare. 'I can't...'

'So you *do* want a baby!'

'Absolutely not.' he snapped. 'I need a baby like I need a bullet through my skull. Of course I wish she wasn't pregnant. No doubt it would be easier, but-'

'Just tell Aoi-chan then!'

'I can't!' he raised his voice, clearly pissed off with Ai's incessant prodding. 'It's not my body. It's not my decision to make.'

'She could ruin your life, just like you said.'

'Yeah... Well, I don't want to ruin hers.'

Yusaku thought about all the things he wanted to scream out into the world. *I don't want to have a baby!* was definitely at the top of his list. It may be cruel, but it was his honest feeling. There were too many accomplishments that he wanted to achieve, and having a child was going to effectively make those goals more difficult if not impossible. He also had no interest in pursuing a long-term intimate relationship with Aoi - being stuck playing *family* certainly wasn't his plan for his immediate future.

Even so, he couldn't deny the slight spark of insane happiness he tried to keep under lock and key in his heart. *I must be losing my mind,* he thought upon realization that he was actually *delighted* by the prospect of Aoi having his baby. But that was as far as it went; only the idea was seductive. The reality of it was nothing less than devastating.

He didn't want to be a father. *Fuck that*. He didn't even know how to be a decent human being half the time.

As Yusaku tried to go to sleep in his bed later in the evening, he kept tossing and turning, chasing away his consciousness' voice reminding him of his essence in Aoi's womb. He remembered how warm and inviting it was inside of her, and how sweetly she'd look up at him, and how erotic and sexy the sounds she made were. He'd gaze at her in that vulnerable state, and he'd feel the most intense burst of love for her. It was never just sex with Aoi: every touch, every caress held a thousand words he couldn't say, and a million years of longing he'd resigned himself to. He wanted to melt with her so that he could never be away from her ever again, at least in that moment when they were one and the same and shaking with passionate pleasure. Though it was biting him in the ass now, he wouldn't take back those candid moments with Aoi back. They were precious memories of the

only moments in his life thus far wherein he'd experienced such intense romantic, erotic love.

'Hey, dummy!' Ai quipped. 'What are you rolling around in bed for? Why can't you sleep?'

'Be quiet.'

'What are you thinking about?'

'I said, *be quiet*.'

'Are you thinking about *her*?'

Yusaku stiffened.

'I can tell when you're thinking about her. 'Cause you lean towards the right side of the bed, where you keep the-'

'*Shut up*.' Yusaku warned, not wanting to hear the embarrassing truth.

Was it seriously that obvious?

He didn't realize how transparent his behaviour was.

He'd gravitate towards the right side of the mattress, where a bedside table stood. In its top drawer was the small, glass bottle of lavender oil that Aoi had bought him. Yusaku couldn't find the audacity to dispose of it, and he secretly wanted a tangible reminder of her sitting somewhere within his safe space. He never reached for it and never once applied it onto his skin himself, but the temptation was there, gnawing at him until his insomnia could be attributed to something other than anxiety or trauma.

His heart was broken and it *hurt*, but it didn't make him want to necessarily be with Aoi. With contempt, Yusaku realized that he feared what real, committed intimacy would reveal about himself: that he was fundamentally flawed, and that he wasn't this *Playmaker* puppet master who called all the shots like he'd like to think that he does. He was also aware that Aoi herself

could disappoint him, and that she had already started to. Despite her icy demeanour at school, she was emotional and insecure. These weren't qualities that he'd like his partner to have as it created more work for him. Specifically, she posed a challenged that he couldn't tackle. He completely fails at being kind or loving to her, nor can he stop her from hurting when she's upset. This took a huge chunk out of his ego.

He's not good for her and he'll never be good enough.

But he's been so used to being the *best*.

'If you miss her so much, Yusaku, just take a whiff out of that flowery oil she got you.'

Yusaku sighed. 'No.'

'Why not? I won't tell anyone.'

'I don't want to inhale her. I don't want to miss her.'

'Don't you?' Ai pressed. 'Already miss her, I mean.'

Yusaku thought about it. Then, he spoke softly, 'Yeah. After she left this place to go back home, I haven't stopped thinking about her.' he admitted. 'Even if I want to, I can't. It's like I'm sick in the head or something.'

'You're only realizing now that you're mentally messed up?'

Aoi was feeling good today.

She tried to tell herself that her high spirits might be due to the fact that she got a marked test back earlier, and she had done really well. But she always did well, so this made no sense. Or perhaps she was in a good mood because this morning, her brother shared a longer-than-usual breakfast with her. If that wasn't the case, then surely it was because of a million other

different reasons that had *nothing* to do with the fact that she had finally spoken to Yusaku yesterday, and that conversation didn't go so bad.

Right?

Try as she might to conceal it, she was incredibly happy to have finally gained some closure on their relationship. While they weren't lovers anymore, she was pleasantly surprised that Yusaku didn't push her away aggressively like he normally does. Moreover, his embrace by the end of it all made her heart flutter even after the fact. She looked back at that memory fondly, and often had to catch herself from smiling absent-mindedly in class. She felt like she had fallen in love all over again, though the painful truth was that she had never really fallen out of it.

I should stop, she thought, *before I get hurt again.*

But she *couldn't* stop thinking about him.

Sitting in class while half the students were dozing off and the even the teacher was bored with his own subject matter, Aoi felt brave enough to palm her womb. A warm feeling filled her heart. There was life inside of her. As terrifying as it was, this secret of hers also gave her a level of happiness that she never thought was possible. She loved Yusaku unconditionally, so while he had burnt her so many times, the idea of having *his* child made her happy. She was aware that he didn't want it, but *she* did and that was enough to give her satisfaction.

There were moments when she suffered bouts of depression. Particularly when she was physically feeling under the weather, and the nausea would kick in like a super virus in the early beginnings of the worst flu. Those were also times wherein she wanted to just scream a public announcement that was pregnant, just so she could stop hiding this from everyone around her. Not even Akira suspected a thing - Aoi was grateful for the baggy top of her school uniform, but she was also lucky insofar as her body hadn't developed any noticeable changes.

But what about when it would start?

How would she feel about it then?

She wants something she shouldn't desire. What she should be doing is booking herself an appointment at the nearest clinic to terminate this pregnancy. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. She wanted this baby. Or at least, she wanted to hang onto it for a while longer.

Her class before lunch ended, and she packed up her bag before heading out of the classroom.

'Hey!' Takeru took her by surprise as she entered the hallway. He was waiting right outside, and he flashed her his nearly trademarked smile. 'Zaizen, coming to join Yusaku and me for lunch?'

'O-Oh...' Aoi stammered momentarily. She didn't think that Yusaku was actually serious about his lunch invitation yesterday. Furthermore, she didn't think Takeru was going to pick her up from class again. Did those two work in pairs or something? 'T-Takeru-kun... Hi.'

'Hi. Come on, now. Yusaku's waiting at the usual spot.'

'Um...' she averted her gaze. 'I don't think he actually meant for me to come. I think he was just being polite.'

'Nonsense!' Takeru laughed wholeheartedly. 'Come with me!'

'No...'

'Zaizen-'

'It's alright!' she laughed dismissively, waving a hand at him as she walked away. It was sweet of Yusaku to invite her today, and even sweeter of Takeru to come by to pick her up again, but she didn't want to burden them with her unwanted presence. She enjoyed both of their company, but she didn't want to be selfish. They had been kind enough already. 'I'll catch you some other time, though! See you!'

Takeru stared at her as she made her exit, but ultimately decided not to pursue her. Yusaku's mood yesterday when they reconvened after school had ended was indicative that the conversation he had with Aoi wasn't bad. Yusaku insisted that he wanted nothing more to do with Aoi Zaizen, so Takeru felt that perhaps one meeting between those two was enough.

But he was wrong.

'Zaizen's not joining us.' Takeru announced as he took his seat in front of Yusaku.

'What?' his brows furrowed and he was clearly disappointed. Takeru must have shown his surprise at Yusaku's reaction, so the latter forcibly settled his features in an emotionless expression before continuing, 'I invited her for lunch yesterday. She said she'd come.'

'Well, she's not. I tried picking her up after her class ended.'

'I see.' Yusakuu responded with calculated numbness. His green eyes lost some vibrancy and they focused with unnecessary interest on his hands, which were folded on top of the tabletop's wooden surface. Why hadn't Aoi come to see him? He thought for sure that she was comfortable with him after yesterday.

'Don't worry.' Takeru teased. 'Maybe she's just playing hard to get.'

'Shut the fuck up.'

'OK.'

The rest of the lunch went on as usual. Takeru always did most of the talking, and Yusaku was content to just listen. This was their normal routine. However, today, Yusaku was distracted. He couldn't take in what Takeru was saying. Yusaku's mind was elsewhere, wandering to thoughts of Aoi and what she must be doing and who she must be feeling about him and her pregnancy.

'Yusaku?'

'Mm?'

'What's wrong?' Takeru inquired. 'You're super spacey.'

'Oh... Nothing.'

What was he supposed to say?

Yusaku kept his feelings locked inside in silence for the remainder of the day. He hoped that he would bump into Aoi in the halls, but that didn't happen. Every second that passed by that he didn't see her brought him closer to the edge of panic. Partly, he wanted to see her because he wanted to ascertain whether or not she was truly with his child. Other than that, the truth was that he also just missed her. Maybe he hoped that now that they were sort of on speaking terms, he could begin a relationship with her. Perhaps not as friends and certainly not lovers, but he thought that they could finally be in each other's lives.

Did Aoi not want that?

As soon as Yusaku got home, he called her. He didn't expect her to pick, so when she did, he was emotionally unprepared.

'Hey.' he greeted, his heartbeat speeding up ridiculously quickly. 'Thought you were going to join me for lunch today.'

'Oh... Really?'

'Yes. I invited you yesterday, didn't I?'

Aoi giggled sweetly.

Yusaku's heart melted. His bones went weak and he thought he might stumble from the lovely sound of her voice, so he sat down on his bed. The experience was exotically pleasing. He couldn't recall a moment when he made Aoi laugh. This was the first time he had heard her make that noise,

and its effect on him was impossible to exaggerate. Without even realizing, a smile began to form on his lips and all the anxiety he felt from last night dissipated instantaneously.

'It wasn't very nice of you to ghost me.' he warned her playfully.

'I guess I'm not a nice girl then.'

'No.' he bit his lip. 'You're just the worst.'

Though they weren't physically in the same space as each other, the sexual tension in their exchange of words was hard to ignore. Yusaku shifted on his bed, trying to relieve some of the energy building up in his body. Talking to Aoi was invigorating. He was excited, and he had lost all control of his facial expressions. He was smiling like an idiot, his eyes were twinkling not just from the moonlight seeping into his room, and his chest was fluttering with boyish delight.

Aoi giggled again, and his grin grew.

'Yusaku... Why are you calling me?'

'Can't I just want to talk to you?' he said without thinking, immediately regretting his words. *Shit*, he mouthed to himself, and Ai was jumping for joy on the desk, giddy that its master was starting to be more honest with his emotions. 'I-I mean...' he rubbed his face with a free hand, but decided that it was too late. He resigned to his moment of vulnerability. 'I missed you at lunch.' he finally admitted.

'Hehe...'

Yusaku's heart was threatening to punch out of his chest.

'You miss me?' she asked in a syrupy tone, although there was a hint of sadness. 'Really?'

'Yes.' he whispered gently. 'I do.'

'That's...' Aoi trailed off, and Yusaku suddenly felt the nature of their conversation take a nasty turn. He was about to say something, but she cut him off, 'It's late. I should get to bed.'

'I see...' he was disappointed, but he tried his best to conceal it. 'Good night, then.'

'Good night.'

Neither of them ended the call. They were both aware of the other's presence still on the line. An awkwardly lengthy silence followed, only to be broken by Aoi's innocent laughter.

'Sorry. I'm so awkward.'

'You're not.' he assured her. 'I promise.'

'You're just being polite... But I'll go now.'

'Wait.'

'Mm?'

'You... Can I see you?'

Aoi gripped the phone harder and tried to suppress the urge to meet him. 'You don't have to do that. We're good. Don't worry about me.'

'No!' he protested a little too loudly. He caught himself and collected his composure. 'I *want* to see you. It's not... It's not the way you think it is.'

'You don't have to explain yourself.'

'Aoi-'

'Good night.'

'No, please, Aoi-'

The line went dead and Yusaku exhaled roughly. He flung his phone somewhere on his sheets and fell on his back. Ai was yipping some nonsensical, bullshit advice, but Yusaku tuned him out. Emerald orbs fixated on the ceiling, pondering his next move. Maybe this was for the best. He and Aoi finally got their closure, and they could part ways now. Yusaku didn't know for certain if she was pregnant or not. However, it was becoming more apparent that Aoi wanted nothing to do with him. So why even prod where he wasn't wanted?

But he wanted her to want him.

Yusaku shut his eyelids, defeated by his own emotions.

I'm in love with her. Fuck.

'You need to win her back, Playmaker-sama.' Ai proposed.

'Shut. Up.'

'Maybe start with some flowers?'

Yusaku groaned.

When Aoi hung up on Yusaku, she sprawled herself on her bed. She placed a hand over her beating heart and tried desperately to calm it down. It was beating at a million miles a minute, overwhelmed by Yusaku's voice. Yet, Aoi resolved not to force her feelings onto him ever again. She wasn't going to burden him with the pregnancy either, not until she either got rid of it or got too big to hide it.

She still hadn't made up her mind on whether or not she wanted to keep it.

She thought for certain that she wanted to have this baby, but the more she thought about it, the more she questioned her conviction. What kind of life would it have? How good of a position was she in to be a mature, supportive mother? How would it feel, knowing its father wanted nothing to

do with it? How would *she* feel, having the offspring of a man who wanted absolutely nothing to do with her either?

Aoi's heart sank.

Selfish as it may seem, she didn't want to have the child of someone who didn't love her or what was inside of her. But she also couldn't bring herself to reconcile with the idea of terminating potential life. Of course, she was aware that it was just a mass of cells right now. It had no heartbeat. There was no life. But it *could* have life, and the possibility kept her from reaching a solid conclusion.

A knock at her door tore her out of her thoughts.

'Come in.' she called out.

Akira walked into her bedroom, worry etched on his face. Aoi immediately sat up, scooted to the edge of her bed, and averted her brother's gaze.

'Onii-sama.' she greeted tightly. 'What's wrong?'

'Aoi...' he sat down on her mattress, but she refused to look at him. 'Who were you talking to on the phone?'

'Oh...'

'Was it...?'

'No.' she lied. 'You know that I'm dating Takeru-kun.'

Akira shrugged his shoulders. He never really bought that fake relationship, but he wasn't about to let Aoi know that. He always knew that deep down, there was only one man who Aoi loved irrefutably. 'Well... If in your heart, you still love-'

'Stop.' Aoi interrupted, finally staring at her brother with hurt-filled hazels. 'Just stop.'

'Aoi-'

'You gave me so much shame and trouble because of my feelings for him.' she snapped. 'You made me date that... That...' she grimaced. 'That *old pervert*, and now you're saying it's fine to be in love with whoever I want?!'

'You're in pain, I know.' Akira pleaded. Aoi looked away again. Tears were welling up in her eyes. 'But you have to tell me why. What happened with my colleague? Why haven't you been the same since you saw him last? Why are you always *angry* at me?'

'*Nothing happened*!' she insisted. 'What, you think I slept with him too?! You think I'm a slut, I know, but at least try to hide it! You're my *family*!'

'I never said that!' Akira was losing it. He reached for her arm, but she yanked it away, glaring at him like he had just bitten her or like *she* wanted to take a bite out of him. 'But I don't believe that nothing happened! You came home the last time you saw him, smelling like *smoke*.' he reminded her. 'And you were dead in the eyes. And you stayed up, vomiting *all night*.'

Aoi's eyes widened.

'Yeah.' Akira scoffed. 'I knew about that. This is *my* house.' he pressed. 'You're my sister. I *raised* you. I gave everything for you, I have one eye on you at all times.'

'At all times?' she smiled bitterly. 'What a *joke*.'

Akira recoiled sharply.

'Nothing happened.' she declared confidently. 'And I don't love Yusaku. So whatever you think you know, you don't.'

Akira stared at her in silence for a long moment before standing up and leaving abruptly.

Aoi was once again left alone.

She raced for the door after it shut behind Akira. She locked it and then turned, back to the expensive wood, and slumped to the floor as her tears fell and she sobbed into her hands.

Hey guys, thank you so much for supporting this story!

If you have an account, I've responded to you privately. If not, I respond to you below.

Yujo0147, so glad you enjoyed the last chapter! Akira's reaction will be later down the plot, as the next few chapters will be more Yusaku-centric. Thank you so much for your continued encouragement!

Aniki, Aoi will be revealing her pregnancy soon! Yes, it will be slow, but it will also be careful. They both need to be careful with each other. Thank you for your continued support!

Guest, thank you for your review! Aoi will tell Yusaku that she is pregnant soon.

Guest, Yusaku will be confronting Aoi again about that suitor, so his feelings about it will be explored. I'm so glad you enjoyed the last chapter and thank you for your kind review!

Finally, poetrymagic12 has asked that I mention their story, Detective Files. I give a little summary and my own opinion about it in my note in Chapter 19. But just to briefly reiterate, it's a good read! I really enjoy it, and am so excited for what the author has planned!

22. Stabbed

'You and Zaizen, huh?' Naoki Shima whispered to the classmate seated beside him. He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, barely suppressing semi-malicious giggling that could have come across as evil had his grin not been so wide and toothy. Naoki was an avid gossiper, and he intended to get the biggest scoop out of the most tight-lipped student in all of Den City High School.

The man in question, Yusaku Fujiki, just glared at the intruding Naoki.

'People are saying that they saw you guys hugging the other yesterday.' Naoki continued. 'What was that about, hmm?'

Yusaku sighed. It was so tasteless of Naoki to raise this topic, particularly during class. There was no way Yusaku could rebuff him successfully without making a scene. Silence never worked on Naoki either. Then again, what information could Yusaku divulge? Nothing was going on between him and Aoi. That hug was just... Well, it was affectionate, but wasn't meant to be read into.

'I knew it! You like her.' Naoki's eyes glimmered with fan boyish delight. 'Oh man... You guys would be perfect together! Both of you have that semi-permanent, dead-fish-stare thing going on.'

'Thanks.' Yusaku mumbled. Could Naoki get any more offensive? Yusaku was aware that his stout classmate was just trying to be innocently involved, but Naoki had a bad habit of coming across as rude.

Yusaku decided not to entertain the ramblings of his fellow student any longer. Rather than shut Naoki down completely, Yusaku let him run his mouth while tuning him out. From all his time of knowing Naoki, he knew that the only way to really gain the upper hand was to exhaust him. Then, if possible, correct him.

Except what exactly was there to correct?

He could say that he wasn't interested in Aoi all he wanted, but the fact of the matter was that he at the very least liked holding her. The student body had already seen that. It was his own pride that couldn't admit to it. That was precisely what was so dangerous about Aoi; she brought sides of him that he didn't even know existed, and she lowered his inhibitions so that for even just a split second, he didn't have his guard up. Except Yusaku *needed* his guard to be at all times - he didn't trust people, and he never wanted to learn how.

Fuck people.

But...

'Aoi.' he called out when he spotted that woman walking in front of him in the hallway. Her back visibly stiffened, but she kept on walking anyway. That pissed Yusaku off. What the hell? She had obviously heard him. '*Aoi*.' he repeated, chasing after her with speedy steps. Detecting the urgency in his tone, she finally stopped and turned around.

'Fujiki Yusaku-kun.' she greeted playfully, though it pained her to act so casually around him. However, she hid her innermost feelings so well that not even Yusaku could figure out that she every second spent talking to him was driving a knife deeper into her chest. She wanted to touch him so badly, but knew that he probably wouldn't like that. Then, he'd just lash out at her again and they'd be back to square one.

Yusaku was so much kinder to her when they weren't *together* like that.

Aoi liked him best when he was kind.

'You're joining Takeru and me for lunch today, right?'

Aoi smiled, but said nothing.

Yusaku smiled back, and didn't break eye contact.

She laughed uncomfortably. 'Stop staring at me. You're making me nervous.' she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and averted her gaze. Her heart was beating in that rabbit-quick pace that could only made possible by him. She hates how much she loves his attention, and how his opinion affects her.

'I'm staring at you because you haven't given me a response.'

'That's...'

'You don't have to come if you don't want to.' he clarified. 'But I'd like to spend some time with you.'

'*Ohhhhh*!' Naoki hollered as he passed the pair. 'He wants to spend time with her! *Cuuuute*!'

'I fucking hate that guy.' Aoi snipped once Naoki was out of earshot.

Yusaku gave a genuine chuckle. Aoi's heart skipped a beat. She was proud that she got Yusaku to laugh, but was aware that she should be doing her best to suppress those feelings.

'Do you want to spend time with me, Aoi?'

Aoi's resolve wavered. 'Sure...'

'Oh!' Takeru's face lit up as two familiar faces approached him. 'Zaizen!' he waved from his seat on the bench, unwilling to get up and greet them properly as he was already well into his lunch. 'This is a nice surprise! Wasn't expecting Yusaku to be able to convince you to join us.'

Yusaku quirked a brow. 'Are you saying that I lack negotiation skills?'

'*Ha*! Nah! That you do not.' Takeru joked as lightly tinted lavender eyes settled on Aoi. 'But Zaizen is not an easy girl to convince.'

'Hmm?' Aoi smiled. 'Takeru-kun, is that a compliment?'

'Hehe. Of course.'

The three friends (?) shared a normal, unexciting lunch together. It was more comfortable than any of them anticipated. Yusaku and Aoi were half-expecting a disastrous hour, but the surprising reality was that they, in particular, got along quite well. They didn't talk much, but they found solace in each other's presence. Takeru did most of talking: which was fine, because he had a vibrant personality that was fun to be around. Aoi laughed happily at all of his jokes and it was evident that she liked conversing with him. Yusaku observed them both with strange satisfaction. He cared for both of them in different ways, so it brought him great enjoyment to see them get along so well.

While speaking with Takeru, Aoi would flash Yusaku the occasional glance. Without fail, his green gaze met her hazel orbs every time. That was when she'd blush slightly, look back at Takeru, and pretend like she had never been distracted. Yusaku would then feel a tinge of melancholy in his heart, knowing fully well why she'd look at him with such sad longing.

He felt very much the same way.

It was painful to be so close to her, but being unable to reach out and touch her.

But this situation (in public and with a third person in close proximity) felt so much *safer*. It was as if all the fears he secretly held towards her had been suspended. There was no pressure to constantly negotiate their relationship because there was no capacity to take their interaction to a heightened emotional level. Limits, Yusaku decided, were probably a good thing with Aoi. She was a passionate soul, but he didn't know how to handle that. She was unpredictable and candid, which were beautiful qualities about her, but those were the same characteristics that rendered it next to impossible for Yusaku to strategize.

This way, watching her from a distance, being able to make sure that she was fine without having the ability to hurt her, was enough. He might have wanted more, but scolded himself internally for it. He didn't have the tools

to pursue a healthy relationship with her. Furthermore, the last thing he wanted to do was risk pushing her away, considering that she might be carrying his child. He wanted her to let him in on that. In his belief, it was his right to know. It was insulting that she was holding back that information even though he had already worked it out.

A bell rang, signalling the end of the break's hour.

'That went by quickly.' Takeru observed, clearly disappointed. Lunchtime was more lively with a bigger group. He wasn't one to crave the company of others, but Aoi was a nice addition to the dynamic between himself and Yusaku.

'It did.' Yusaku agreed. He then turned his attention to Aoi. 'Was it worth your while?'

Aoi smiled. 'Mm... Thanks for inviting me.'

'You should come again.' Takeru suggested.

'Um...' she thought about it, but found the idea preposterous. Hang out with these two again? Be in the same space as Yusaku without him rejecting her or seducing her? Be in the same space as Yusaku when she was secretly carrying his genetic material?

No.

'No.' she waved a hand dismissively as she laughed uncomfortably. 'I don't want to intrude-'

'You're not!' Takeru insisted. 'It's fun having you around! Right, Yusaku?'

Yusaku said nothing, but smouldering emeralds were studying Aoi. She could feel him staring at her, but refused to meet his gaze. What was he thinking? She could never tell. And she feared that if she looked at him, he might see just how terrified she was of stepping on the broken glass of their relationship. She was so close to him now that she didn't want to irritate

him. If she hovered around him too much, then he might just grow sick of her presence and swat her away.

Aoi crossed her arms over her chest defensively. Why did she even care? She should stop playing *best buddies* with these guys and just move on already.

Sensing her doubts, Yusaku spoke, 'Come join us whenever you like.'

'You're so polite, but don't worry about it.' Aoi replied flatly, though the venom in her implication wasn't lost on her former lover.

'*I'd* prefer it if you joined us again.' Yusaku pressed. His phrasing was purposely meant to emphasize his desire to spend time with her again. He was determined to remain unfazed, though her bitter words cut him.

'Thanks.' Aoi smiled tightly before turning on her heel.

'Well, I'm looking forward to seeing more of you!' Takeru called out, and Aoi waved in response. 'She's sweet!' he commented once she was far away. 'It's really nice that you invited her.'

'Yeah.'

The next day rolled by, and Yusaku contemplated whether or not he should actively seek Aoi out. On one hand, he would most probably come across as aggressive and *interested* in her, which was an impression that he wanted to avoid. On the flip side, it was unlikely that she was actually going to show up of her own volition. The choice between these two options was just a matter of Yusaku determining how desperate he was willing to make himself look.

'Aoi.' Yusaku greeted when he *coincidentally* bumped into her in the hallways during lunch. 'Any plans?'

She giggled sweetly, genuinely moved by his efforts. 'You're not subtle.'

'Oh.' he frowned, disappointed in his lack of social stealth.

'You don't have to be nice to me.' she smiled gently. 'I'm fine. Really.'

'I know you are. Like I said before, I just want to spend time with you.'

'You want to spend time with me? That's quite out of character of you, don't you think?'

That *stung*, but Yusaku kept his cool. It was a challenge, but he remained composed. Aoi had essentially punched right through him with those words. Guilt was already a permanent resident in his heart because of all the shit he knew he put her through, but for her to verbally use it against him in the most implicit of ways was more painful than he wanted to admit.

'I'm sorry.' he said softly. 'For everything that I did to you. I really just want to-'

'It's fine!' she cut him off suspiciously quickly, like she didn't want to talk about the past. 'I already said before that I'm the one who was horrible, so please don't bring it up anymore. You don't have to hang out with me or anything. It's over. It's fine. I'm fine. I swear.' she spoke frantically before turning around and walking away.

Yusaku wanted to pursue her, but decided that she would be unresponsive.

'Where's Zaizen?' Takeru asked later, when they were seated on the same bench.

Yusaku shrugged. He didn't want to talk about it.

It was dawning on him just how badly he had burnt her, and just how hurt he was getting by being consistently rejected by her.

A week went by. In that time, Yusaku kept a close watch on Aoi. He observed her for any noticeable physically changes, but was frustrated by the baggy fit of her sweater. Then again, if she was really pregnant, would it

show by now? He researched the stages of pregnancy extensively in his spare time, but found that each body was unique and that it was entirely possible for some women to never get that big.

'Just ask her already.' Ai quipped once.

'Be quiet.' Yusaku dismissed his Ignis.

But Ai refused to give up. 'Has it occurred to you that maybe Aoi-chan isn't telling you because she doesn't want you to be involved?'

'Why would you think that?'

'I don't know. Maybe she doesn't trust you.'

Yusaku's jaw tightened.

'That's fine, right?' Ai continued. 'All the better for you, since you don't want her to be pregnant anyway. If she won't tell you, you won't ever know, and it'll be the same as her not carrying your DNA at all!'

'Shut up.'

'You don't even know if it's yours.'

Yusaku stiffened.

Ai carried on. 'Didn't Takeru say that he saw her kissing another guy? They probably messed around too. That's probably why she isn't telling you even if she is: because it's not yours.'

Yusaku's heart fell.

He should have been relieved by that possibility, but it only hurt him immensely. That thought stuck with him, bothering him until he was rolling around in his bed, unable to sleep or even shut his eyes for long. When he awoke the next day (how had he even gone to sleep?), he still felt hollow.

He walked to school in a daze. He didn't even have the energy to tell Ai to keep quiet. It was like he turned into a zombie overnight, stuck on autopilot.

Strangely enough, the small of his back started hurting again. The pain was sharp, coming in stabs at the most random of times. Today, the pain was so intense that he'd slump over his desk, trembling from the strain of trying not to cry out. His spine felt like it was about to snap.

'Lovesick?' Ai whispered from Yusaku's school bag.

'Shut. *Up*.' Yusaku warned.

The bell rang to indicate that it was lunch time yet again, and Yusaku dragged his feet to the hallway. Aching bouts of electricity zapped at his bones and he swore that it felt just like being hit by a monster in LINK VRAINS. With a heavy sigh, he turned a corner but was surprised to come face to face with Aoi Zaizen yet again. This time, it was entirely unintentional.

'Fujiki Yusaku-kun.' Aoi teased, thinking that he was purposely running into her once more. 'Still haven't given up?'

Seizing the opportunity, Yusaku shot back, 'What are you talking about? My lunch invitation is open: you can accept anytime.'

'Eh? But if it's open, then I technically can't really decline it.'

'That's the point.' he smirked. Aoi allowed herself to admire his dreamy features, which were all the more charming when they set into a soft expression like the one who was currently wearing. Subconsciously, her own smile tugged at her lips. Yusaku noticed this and was about to say something, but a sharp pang of pain caused him to jolt forwards. Aoi squeaked, and Yusaku braced himself on the wall. 'D-Damn... My fucking back...'

Worried, Aoi reached around his spine to massage its base. In this position, her body was dangerously close to his, but she couldn't think about that

when he was keeled over in obvious pain. 'Are you alright?' she questioned absent-mindedly, entirely focused on soothing him.

Yusaku could barely register what she was saying

She was so close to him that the scent of lavender was desirably intoxicating.

He felt his bones melt. Nostalgia jogged his memory and his mind went back to the time when Aoi was kneading his muscles with that scented oil that smelled just like her. Tortuously, he clearly recalled the texture of her fingers working into his skin and the warmth of her body laying next to his when they drifted off to sleep. That was only a few weeks ago and yet he questioned if it ever really happened.

How could one be so close to another human being one evening, and then complete strangers the next morning?

The hollow feeling in his gut intensified. He now knew just how confused and lonely he had made Aoi feel all those times he lured her in only to kick her back out.

'You're so tense again...' Aoi spoke softly, bringing Yusaku back to reality. 'Maybe you need to see a therapist...'

'Maybe...' he echoed before pulling away from her. His gaze met hers, and her expression was still one etched with concern. Yusaku smiled at her in an attempt to be reassuring. 'Don't worry. I'm fine.'

'You know what?' she huffed, still troubled by her former lover's physical ailment. 'I'll join you for lunch today.'

Yusaku and Aoi met Takeru yet again, who was ecstatic to have a larger group to enjoy his break with. Takeru did all the talking, while Aoi worked on Yusaku's back. Truthfully, the back pain had dissipated as soon as they sat down, but Yusaku decided not to inform her because he selfishly wanted

to enjoy her attention for a while longer. Besides, when would he get this opportunity again?

The bell rang. The three students parted, and Yusaku thought about Aoi up until the moment that he fell asleep on his bed later that evening.

Surprisingly, the next day, Aoi was the one to approach him.

'Can I join you for lunch again?' she asked, and Yusaku tried his best to hide his excitement as he gave a small nod.

The day after that, Yusaku was the one to invite her, and she accepted.

And the following day, no invitation was necessary. Aoi just showed up to where Yusaku and Takeru normally sat for lunch.

A pattern ensued: Takeru spoke, Aoi engaged in mild but pleasant conversation with him, and Yusaku observed them contentedly. For once, Yusaku felt like a normal teenager who had a good amount of friends and no trauma to speak of. He appreciated Takeru's friendship, and was happy to be near a woman he had feelings for. And it was *nice*. It was comfortable: no fighting, no mixed feelings, no fear. Yusaku wasn't scared of getting to close to Aoi because there was no opportunity to transition into a sexual atmosphere with a third party present. Yet, she wasn't physically away from him, so it didn't necessarily pain him to be away from her.

He only felt a dull ache in his chest when he was hit with the desperate desire to touch her.

He knew, of course, that he couldn't.

Is she even pregnant?

Is she event pregnant with my baby?

Is she even mine anymore?

These questions haunted him, but he pushed them to the back of his head. He just had to wait a little while longer. It's been a little over three weeks now. Soon, Aoi wouldn't be able to hide if she was really pregnant. And even if she could, his impatience would inevitably get the better of him. Perhaps he would just straight-up ask her. It was a fair inquisition, wasn't it?

Or maybe he'd ask her about that guy she was kissing?

But before Yusaku could tackle these issues, a new conflict arose.

'So... What's going on between you and Zaizen?' Takeru asked one day as he and Yusaku walked to the viewing plaza from school. They were supposed to meet Shoichi Kusanagi to assist in his vending truck. They had a while to go before they reached their destination, so Takeru thought that this was a good chance to ask Yusaku about something that has been bothering him.

'Huh?' Yusaku frowned, confused. Why was Takeru asking him this question? Shouldn't it be obvious that he and Aoi were...? Alright, admittedly, Takeru's question was a good one. But why was he asking? Was Takeru perhaps still curious about why the dynamic between himself and Aoi used to be so tense and sexual? 'You mean, if I used to date her?'

'No.' Takeru cleared his throat awkwardly. 'I don't need to hear about that. I... I can kind of guess what you guys used to be up to.'

The heat rushed to Yusaku's face. '*Ah*.'

'I was asking more about... You know, the present.'

Yusaku thought about it. 'Well... I guess you could say we're acquaintances.'

'Acquaintances?'

'Yes. I mean, she and I know each other. Therefore, the term *acquaintances* is a suitable term for my relationship with her.'

'Is that as far as it goes?' Takeru pressed. 'I mean, you guys regularly talk now and stuff. You still don't consider her a friend?'

Yusaku's frown deepened. 'Why does that matter to you?'

At that, Takeru blushed and averted his gaze. Unfortunately, Yusaku was quick to notice and reached a logical conclusion.

'You like her.' Yusaku asserted. 'Don't you?'

'Yes.'

Yusaku felt the insides of his stomach liquify sickeningly, like someone had gutted him. The ground beneath him felt unsteady under his feet, though in reality it was his own balance that was being thrown off. Never in a million years did he suspect that Takeru could develop feelings for Aoi. Sure, he snapped at Takeru over that hypothetical situation before... But that was so different. Because if Takeru had feelings for Aoi back then when he didn't know her so well, then that attachment could easily be dismissed as shallow attraction. However, Takeru had by now been able to spend enough time with Aoi for that attraction to progress into something akin to love. Furthermore, Takeru was his *best friend*. It was unfathomable that Takeru would fall for the girl that Yusaku himself liked.

Yusaku thought he was going to kill someone.

'Hey...' Takeru whispered. 'If *you* like her, I won't do anything...'

'You say that, but the truth is that being unable to express your feelings for her is eating you up inside.'

'Yeah...'

Yusaku's jaw tightened. He knew how Takeru felt because it was almost exactly how he himself felt on a daily basis: that it was better to stay silent than tell the one you like that you're interested in them. Being in love with someone who he just wasn't compatible with, and that same incompatibility

nurturing a deep-seated fear that a future wasn't possible and thus there was no point in even trying, was a feeling Yusaku knew *all too well*. In Takeru's case, his silence was due to his loyalty to Yusaku. It was a fact that made Yusaku feel all the more connected to Takeru as his best friend, but also made him want to lash out.

All this time you've been lusting after Aoi?

'What is it about her that you like so much?' Yusaku swerved the conversation. He needed to, or he was going to explode with a million different emotions that he wasn't sure he could articulate in a polite, collected manner. He had to gather his thoughts.

But also, he was curious.

'I don't know.' Takeru answered honestly. 'I just do.'

'You must have at least one reason.'

'I'm not like you, though, Yusaku. I don't always have clear reasons for stuff. I just...' he sighed. 'I just think about her all the time.'

'She has that effect on men.'

'She has that effect on *me*.' Takeru insisted. 'I don't care about how other guys feel about her.'

'Yet, you're asking me if I-'

'Because you're my friend. I don't want to create conflict between us.'

Yusaku inhaled deeply. His head was hot. He could feel the blood in his veins boiling, but what was the use of blowing up at Takeru? Takeru, who had been nothing but kind and helpful to him? 'Are you seriously asking me for my blessing?'

'I'm asking if you have feelings for her. If you do, I'll back off.'

'What is she, my property?' Yusaku grimaced. 'And what are *you*? Why do you need my *permission*-'

'I'm trying to be your friend *and* be true to myself!' Takeru snapped, silencing Yusaku. 'It's so simple! Yusaku... If you like her, I won't confess my feelings.'

Yusaku grit his teeth and looked away. What the fuck? He wanted Takeru to get along with Aoi, but not *this well*. And he certainly didn't want to completely sever his special connection to Aoi by providing the opportunity for her to fall in love with someone else. Although, when he really thought about it, why shouldn't Aoi have the chance to have a loving partner? Takeru was a good guy. Aoi deserved someone like him. If, by some miracle of faith, they hit it off and lived happily ever after - why *shouldn't* he be cool with that?

Why am I being so selfish?

'So... How do you feel about her, Yusaku?'

Is she even pregnant?

Is she event pregnant with my baby?

Is she even mine anymore?

'If you like her, I'd want you to two to be together.' Takeru smiled. 'I'm sure she'd make you really happy.'

Yusaku's stone-heart cracked.

'Don't say such stupid things ever again.' Yusaku muttered, stopping in his tracks and walking back the way in which they came. 'You go over to Kusanagi-san. I need to go home.'

Thank you guys for supporting this story! I was overwhelmed by the response last chapter and I hope that you guys enjoyed this instalment. These recent chapters have been Yusaku-centric, but the POV may become more balanced in the next update. Thank you so much for your support and I hope to hear what you guys think about this chapter!

My other story, *Collection* has gone up in rating. It is now rated M. After much deliberation, I decided that it didn't make sense to limit the scope of the subject material I could explore. I still hope that those of you who read the compiled oneshots in that story will still enjoy the future pieces that I write for it. Regardless, thank you for all the support!

If you have an account, I have already responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Yujo0147, you are spot on in your analysis of Yusaku and Aoi! One of them has to change, and the onus of that is on Yusaku as he was the one who rebuffed Aoi's efforts to connect with him. Thank you for your continued support!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, I was thinking that the conversation might turn out that way! I decided to scrap it in the last minute. Yes, Akira is very disconnected with reality regarding Aoi. He sees her for who he thinks she is, not for who she actually is. Thank you for your review!

Aniki, exactly! Yusaku now has the challenge of bridging the same gap he created. They will eventually talk about the baby. That should be soon, maybe in the next chapter or two. Thank you for your continued support!

Guest, Yusaku certainly does need to know how to right his wrongs. They will soon talk about the baby, perhaps in the next chapter. Thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review! And thank you for pointing out Aoi's development.

Guest, thank you for your review! Thank you for your kind words and I hope that the story remains enjoyable for you. As for the godparents, that will be answered in time!

emmadal, thank you for your review!

23. He Knows

Yusaku hardly caught a wink of sleep last night.

He rolled around in his bed, desperately trying to release random bursts of energy that coursed through his body. Zaps of pain would also pierce his spine, rendering it impossible for him to relax. Naturally, the end result was that the poor teenager jerked around throughout the evening, wishing he could just stop thinking about nonsense.

His efforts were futile. He was now a zombie, dragging his feet across campus while glaring at anyone who looked his way. Yusaku was perpetually pissed off this morning, to the point where not even Ai wanted to test its master's patience.

How did this happen?

He pushed Aoi away - he shouldn't be in love with her, and yet he couldn't stop thinking about her.

Takeru was supposed to be his best friend - he wasn't supposed to fall for the same girl.

Yet, these two possibilities had become reality, and Yusaku was angry at himself for letting it get to him so much. Try as he might to pretend that he was colder than ice, the truth was that he was greatly affected by the situation. He was experiencing a surge of a million different emotions at once. He didn't know whether to yell or laugh. Because of his lack of social history, he also didn't have the skills to properly work through his emotions. He had never felt romantic love towards anyone before, nor had he such a good friend as Takeru. On one hand, he wanted to step back and let Aoi and Takeru be a thing. On the other hand, it cut him to think that Aoi could be with anyone other than himself.

It was all was too much for him to deal with.

If someone from above were to smite him down right now, he would gladly go.

'Ah... Yusaku!' Takeru called from behind the aforementioned. With a defeated grunt, Yusaku turned around to acknowledge his friend.

'Takeru... Good morning.'

'Good morning.' the light-haired man returned. He gave an awkward smile before continuing, 'Hey... Forget about yesterday. I was just getting ahead of myself, I guess.'

'No, it's fine.' Yusaku lied. It was most certainly *not* fucking fine. 'I understand.'

'Well, *I* understand that you still have feelings for Zaizen.' Takeru forced himself to adopt a lively tone. The revelation that Yusaku had a connection with Aoi was painful, but Takeru wanted to be the type of person to prioritize the feelings of his comrades before himself. He and Yusaku had been through a lot together, so Takeru was compelled to step aside. Besides, it was likely that Aoi had lingering feelings for Yusaku. Takeru didn't want to compete with that, nor did he think that he even *could*.

'I *don't* have feelings for Aoi.'

'Sure.' Takeru laughed. 'Whatever you say.'

Although he expected it, Yusaku was still anxious when Aoi came up to him and Takeru during the lunch hour. As usual, those two engaged in conversation while Yusaku watched in the sidelines. Normally, observing his companions gave him satisfaction. Today, however, Yusaku was on edge. Perhaps it was because his eyes were now open. The little details that hinted at Takeru's crush were no longer lost on him.

Yusaku had become hyperaware of the signs: Takeru's lovesick eyes that flickered into sadness whenever Aoi looked away, the flirtatious kick in his words... None of this was innocent under Yusaku's scrutinizing gaze. It

angered him, but it was also upsetting. Despite his possessiveness over Aoi, Yusaku could empathize with how difficult it must be for Takeru to keep his emotions under lock and key. Yusaku knew, as well, that Takeru was doing so for his sake. Undeniably, Takeru was being selfless.

Truth to be told, Yusaku held the belief that Takeru deserved Aoi more. After all, Takeru was the one who paraded as Aoi's boyfriend to get her off the hook, and who made the initial effort to patch things up between Yusaku and Aoi. Furthermore, Takeru was much more sociable and kind-hearted than Yusaku could ever fathom of becoming. Takeru was hence more equipped to give Aoi the attention and care that she deserved.

Still... Even with all these convincing thoughts, Yusaku just couldn't come to terms with relinquishing his hold over Aoi's heart.

The fact that she was still in love with him gave him a sense of control. He knew that it was manipulative of him, but he couldn't help but be happy by the notion that he was still the man she wanted. So while he couldn't envision a future with her, he didn't want to truly crush her hopes. He knew that no matter how many times he had rebuffed her in the past that she remained ever-faithful to him in her heart. Try as she might to replicate what they had with other men, Yusaku was confident that her failure to do so was inevitable.

But Takeru was different.

Takeru was a good guy - he was a threat.

And slowly but surely, Aoi was losing interest in Yusaku, who was now just realizing just how badly he had burnt her.

'I can't wait for you guys to get together!' Takeru exclaimed as he and Yusaku walked to the viewing plaza after school to meet Shoichi. 'You guys are gonna be the cutest couple!'

Yusaku coughed awkwardly. 'Don't know about that...'

'You will!' Takeru kept on smiling. 'Man, imagine the shock at school when you guys starting making out in public and-'

And Takeru went on and on, trying to overcompensate for his conversation with Yusaku yesterday. The latter, however, wasn't buying any of it. The tension between the two friends was thickening despite Takeru's attempts to break it down. The dye had already been cast: Yusaku was aware of that his inability to define his relationship with Aoi was hurting Takeru.

Never did Yusaku consider that he would actually pursue a relationship with Aoi. But now that the possibility that their connection could be severed for good was becoming reality, he realized just how selfish he was being. What was he doing, keeping her on a leash? She was hurting every day because of his mind games. These were games that he wasn't aware he was playing, but now needed to acknowledge. Because of his strong self-preservation and unwillingness to trust people, he was so used to manipulative those around him, such as when he provoked Spectre into continuing their duel or when he laughed at Go Onizuka's challenging match with Dr. Genome to stimulate feelings of competitiveness. It was the same with Aoi: he'd reject her only to pull her back into his arms the next minute to build a toxic dynamic wherein she could never get enough of him.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Yusaku asked himself, *How can I say that I care about her after having treated her like shit?*

Later that evening when he was alone in his room, he was overcome with a bout of anxiety. He hadn't felt like this in a long while... Perhaps not in the last five years? Yusaku took pride in the fact that he managed to chase away his psychological demons, though he was now realizing that maybe he had only silenced them. They were still very much alive, crawling in his head, making him feel like complete shit.

'You wanna see that babe, huh?' Ai quipped.

'Be quiet.'

'Why don't you send her a message?'

'She doesn't want to talk to me.' Yusaku sighed. He sat down on in front of his desk, propped his elbows up, and buried his face in his hands. What a fucking mess.

'You don't know that. You guys have been getting along so well recently!'

'Because Takeru's around.'

'Mm...' Ai hummed. 'But you can't ask her about what's bothering you with him around, right?'

Yusaku stiffened.

'You should send her a message.' the Ignis continued. 'See what she's up to. Get it off your chest so that you can move forward. And so that all three of you can move forward, even if those paths diverge.'

'Good advice.' Yusaku admitted, somehow feeling more confident after that mini pep talk.

'Yay!' Ai raised its arms in joy. 'Praise me more!'

'Welcome back, Aoi-chan.' greeted the Zaizen household's robot maid. 'Your Onii-sama can't come home tonight. His work obligations-'

Aoi didn't care to hear the rest of it (she had heard it all before anyway). But more so than that, she desperately needed to lock herself in her bathroom. Once she did that, she dropped to her knees in front of the toilet and threw up. The whole walk home, she felt like her head was going to split in two. The ground beneath her was shaky and she wondered if she would even be able to complete the stroll. Of course, she was glad that she did, but she couldn't exactly bask in her success when all she wanted to do was spill her guts out of her mouth.

'Disgusting.' Aoi murmured with a shiver. She reached up to flush, and she felt somewhat relieved. Groaning, she shifted her weight so she could lean

against the wall.

This *sucked*.

She hated being pregnant.

Not only did she feel fat and unwanted (though that was probably because she didn't have a supportive lover holding her hand throughout this ordeal), but she was also sick as hell. Today, her ailment had taken a turn for the worse. She wasn't just nauseated, she was also starting to come down with a fever. Her back and abdomen were killing her. It felt like she was being stabbed. Her limbs felt like jelly. She was, decidedly, feeling incredibly unsexy. Yet to top it all off, her libido had never been stronger. She was horny *all the time*. How was this even possible? But with no partner and her own unwillingness *to be a slut* (whatever the hell that meant - she wasn't sure anymore) rendered it impossible for her needs to be satisfied.

Just then, her phone rang in the breast pocket of her uniform jacket. She reached for it. Her eyes widened at the caller ID: **YUSAKU FUJIKI**.

'As if I didn't feel shitty enough.' she bemoaned to herself. Nevertheless, she picked up the call and pressed the phone to her ear. 'Hey-' a surge of sickness hit her, and she had to cut herself off. Her throat felt dry and her vision was hazy.

'Aoi.'

'Y-Yusaku...' she huffed, fighting the urge to heave. 'W-Why-'

'Can I talk to you in person?'

'Huh? W-What...' her brows knit together; an instantaneous reaction to express her confusion. Yusaku wanted to talk to her in person? Had she done something wrong? Was he angry at her? She had a million questions that she wanted to ask before she could feel confident to meet him, but between that brainstorming and her stomach feeling like it had been rammed into by a rhino, she could barely process how to best respond. 'I-I-'

before she could say much more, she covered her mouth with a hand to prevent another bout of vomit. This was *terrible*. She hated feeling this way.

'Aoi, please-'

'Come over.' she said quickly. Not wanting to deal with Yusaku while she was sickly (temporarily, she knew), she thought it would be best if he could just see her. Knowing where he lived, she knew that by the time he would reach her apartment, her nausea would dissipate.

'What?'

'Come over.' she repeated, growing more and more frustrated with her former flame by the second.

'That's-'

'I'll text you the address.' she finished before hanging up. Then, she retched over the toilet seat again. After expelling majority of the contents of her stomach, she groggily texted Yusaku her home address. Then, she got up on unsteady feet and undressed.

She was so cold and yet she felt like she was burning. Did that even make sense? It did to her, in this moment. Her skin had broken out into a sweat and she felt like she her insides were melting. She hopped into the shower and turned the temperature up to scalding, but her freezing body was barely calmed. She could have stayed in there forever, but she heard the obnoxious ring of the concierge at the lobby trying to contact the apartment unit.

That must be Yusaku.

That was quick... Or she had lost track of time.

Aoi grudgingly left the shower and dressed herself hastily. She managed to pull on a black mini skirt and a white button-up shirt. Then, she brushed her teeth until she could swear that she was rubbing her gums raw. She gave herself one good look at the mirror before hurrying to answer the phone.

She still wanted to appear attractive to Yusaku. Thankfully, her body hadn't changed at all since she learned of her pregnancy. She figured that it was because she was only about three and a half weeks into the process, and her anxiety about the whole ordeal caused her to lose her appetite. She considered that this may be a blessing in disguise; to mitigate what she anticipated would be weight gain brought out by hormonal changes.

'A guest wants to see you. His name is Fujiki Yusaku.' the receptionist spoke into the receiver when Aoi picked up.

At those words, Aoi's heart started beating quickly. Sure, she was bitter about how her weird casual/sexual/toxic relationship with Yusaku went up in smoke, but she still felt excitement by the prospect of seeing him again privately - without Takeru, without an audience. 'I see...' Aoi whispered. 'That's fine. Send him up.'

Aoi then made her way to the entrance. She made sure to deactivate the robot maid on the way. Her brother might be able to check if she had done that, but she didn't care. These days, her relationship with Akira was extremely strained. Besides, there was no way she could talk to Yusaku properly if the machine's squeaky voice kept chirping.

She saw the lights on the elevator ascend. Yusaku must be coming up. Her heart was beating at a million miles a minute and she forgot about how ill she was. This was so odd... She shouldn't be anxious, considering that she had been spending a considerable amount of time with him. Although she supposed that really, she'd always be talking to Takeru, and thus she and Yusaku hardly actually spoke to each other.

The fact that she was going to face him again was exhilarating and nerve-wracking.

The elevator doors pinged open, and Yusaku stepped out in a black shirt and trousers. Aoi felt the heat rush to her face. It was rare to see Yusaku in casual clothes, which was a shame considering that he had a fantastic body. Nostalgia washed over her, and she suddenly remembered how taut his back muscles would get when he pushed into her, or how his abdomen flexed

when she rode him. She missed the way those smouldering, ominous, green eyes looked at her with a satisfied glimmer; a sight so subtly erotic that she felt it was rightfully her reward for pleasuring him.

She *missed* him.

Aoi willed herself to stay composed.

'F-Fujiki Yusaku-kun.' she managed playfully. 'How can I help you?'

'Thanks for seeing me.' he returned, his eyes meeting hers with almost piercing neediness. He looked determined. But for what, Aoi couldn't tell. 'I want to talk to you.'

'I know.'

Yusaku nodded, but didn't say anything back. This was *awkward*. Why was it always so *fucking awkward* with her? Yes, he wanted to talk to her, but he also wanted to tear her clothes off. He was seriously considering abandoning his mission to go ahead and do the latter, but decided that it was beyond inappropriate.

Focus. *Focus*.

Why was he here again?

'Do you want to come to my room?' Aoi asked softly.

Yusaku raised his brows. '*What*?'

'I mean, because it might be more comfortable.' she reasoned, not intending for her proposition to be taken so... *suggestively*. Rather, she felt that the large space of the living room felt too formal, and she could never ease into a conversation with this kind of environment. It made her feel like Akira was nearby. 'It's just... I prefer my room over the living room.'

'Sure.' he responded with calculated nonchalance. Inside, he was freaking out. He trailed behind Aoi quietly as she led him up the staircase to her

room, but the truth was that a hundred thoughts were whirling around in his mind. Would they kiss right after the door shut behind them? Would Aoi even shut the door? Did she even think of him that way anymore? Did she like Takeru?

'Shut the door behind you.' she commanded when they walked into her bedroom. Yusaku did as he was told, though his gaze was darting around the clean, feminine aesthetic of her quarters. It was pleasing to look at. The room smelled like her too; like strong lavender with hints of honey and rose and seduction. Aoi sat down on her bed, not motioning for her companion to join her on the mattress. She didn't want to make him uncomfortable by enforcing her desire to be close to him. 'So, Fujiki Yusaku-kun!' she started. 'How can I help you?'

Yusaku stared at her for the longest time. She looked so pretty surrounded by the pastel colours of her bedroom. Her eyes were bright and a tranquil smile highlighted her serene features. Aoi was the perfect doll. Although, he knew that she could be even more beautiful, when her delicate features contorted in sensual gratification and his name was torn from her throat over and over.

The minute-long fantasy snapped Yusaku into doubtful thoughts. Did he actually like Aoi? Did he really have feelings for her or was he just insanely attracted to her appearance? Was what he felt for her truly transcendent of normal human connection, or was she simply the object of his sexual fancy?

No, he had to care for her. He thought about her all the time. He worried about her. He wanted to know how she was doing. But was that just because she could potentially be carrying his offspring? Would it then not be simply evolutionary instinct for him to want to ensure her wellbeing? This was, of course, assuming he wanted her to birth it... Which he *didn't*. That would be a *nightmare*-

'You're so quiet!' Aoi laughed nervously. 'I know that look on your face. What are you thinking about?'

'Sorry.' he muttered as he made his way to her. Boldly (perhaps numbed by his racing thoughts) he sat down beside her on the bed. Aoi shifted to be closer to him, but Yusaku didn't seem to mind. 'Aoi... I'm sorry for how I treated you.'

Aoi's expression turned cold. She averted her gaze. 'It's fine. You've apologized to me so many times already.'

'I truly am sorry.'

'OK.' she tucked a lock of hair behind an ear. 'I got it already. You don't have to keep saying it...'

Yusaku frowned. 'Why does it bother you when I apologize?'

'Because I just want to forget about it.' Aoi confessed. 'I was so *stupid*.' she emphasized the last word with painful shakiness. 'Looking back at it now, I realize how delusional I was. It's like I tried to fuck you into loving me.' she scoffed. Yusaku's chest tightened, but he didn't interrupt her. 'I thought that if you were having sex with me, that it meant that you loved me. But the reality was that you thought I was an easy slut-'

'Not once did I ever think of you that way.' he interjected. The knot in his chest was tightening with suffocating pressure. He wanted to reach out and embrace her, but he knew that he had to listen to all of her heartache. Hearing how badly Aoi was hurting inside intensified the guilt that he couldn't shake off from the first sexual encounter they had.

'Then why did you devalue me?' she asked sadly. 'Why did you kick me out? And why did you keep giving me false hope that you cared about me?'

'That's...' he tried to think of an excuse, but his trail of thought was cut short when he noticed a tear slide down his companion's visage.

Aoi quickly wiped it away. 'Don't.' she warned. 'It's OK. I understand. I made it so easy for you. I don't blame you-'

'I was confused.'

'You were anything but confused.'

'Aoi, you scared me.' Yusaku insisted. 'Your feelings for me were so strong and I didn't know how to respond to them. For a while, I didn't even know how I felt about you.'

Aoi rolled her eyes, but Yusaku could clearly see the slight sheen of fresh tears gleaming at her waterline. She looked up at the ceiling and avoided eye contact with him. It killed Yusaku to be rejected by her. He wanted to get on his knees and beg for forgiveness, but surely, she wouldn't like that either. He thought about blurting out that he was in love with her, but he wasn't sure that he knew what love entailed nor was he certain that he could be a good partner to her. In short, Yusaku was *lost*. How was he going to maneuver an impossible situation?

Subconsciously, Aoi palmed her abdomen - an action that was not lost on Yusaku, who soon after observing, felt his stomach drop. Oh, right... She was pregnant. He still hadn't brought that up. He should. But how? What if she just denied it again? And why would she open up to him after he had hurt so much? This was just what he needed to make this moment all the more difficult.

How could he bring that up now?

He didn't.

Acting without much thought, Yusaku reached over to place a hand on top of the one that was nestled on her womb. Surprised, Aoi's eyes widened and flew to Yusaku's face. His gaze met hers and he tried his best to smile warmly.

He succeeded.

Despite herself, Aoi smiled back at him. The permafrost around Yusaku's heart melted when she did that. It was the same smile she gave him

whenever she used to tell him that she was in love with him, the same one she flashed after a particularly passionate bout of lovemaking. That expression of hers in itself was as though she were communicating that she was still in love with him. Yusaku didn't feel like it was necessary to break the silence: he liked it. Because what he and Aoi could never fully say in words, they showcased through moments like this. He may never be able to convince her with words, but surely, he could show her just how strongly he felt about her.

Yusaku leaned in and kissed her fully on the mouth.

Aoi didn't resist. She gasped, but parted her lips to accept his tongue. Her body was humming pleasantly. *This* was what she had been longing for. Ever since she confirmed her pregnancy, she wanted nothing more than Yusaku's affectionate touch. She was starving for it, and she wasn't about to hide her desire. She began undoing the buttons of her blouse, and Yusaku took this as an indicator that they were going to go all the way. With confidence, he dipped the hand that was laying on her stomach underneath her skirt and underwear to stroke her surprisingly wet slit. His member hardened almost painfully.

'Ah!' Aoi recoiled sharply at the contact. Her body was overly sensitive due to her pregnancy. She knew from the research she had done online that her senses would be heightened, but she didn't think that it would feel *this good*. 'Y-Yusaku...' she breathed as he prodded her entrance. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to make love to you.' he whispered into the curve of her neck, inhaling her intoxicatingly sweet lavender perfume. 'I'm going to make you scream until you beg for me to stop.'

'No... Don't stop.' she mewled, arching her back to him.

'I won't.'

'Mm...' she moaned when a finger slipped inside of her. 'Yusaku... Yusaku...'

'I'm here, Aoi.'

'Why...?'

'Because I like you.'

Thank you everyone for supporting this story!

If you have an account, I've responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you for your review! I'm glad that you enjoy the sentimentality of this story.

Yujo0147, this chapter went a little differently than I initially planned, but Yusaku will eventually ask Aoi about the suitor! Thank you for your continued support and kind words!

Aniki, I'm also disappointed that Yusaku hasn't had much interaction with other students. Even his interactions with Naoki are distant and unexciting. Yes, you will definitely still be seeing the three of them interacting in this story. Thank you for your continued support!

24. Diffusion

Aoi felt nothing.

Because I like you.

What was that supposed to mean?

Yusaku didn't even wait for a response before he slipped another finger inside of her. Aoi arched her back to him instinctively and her features contorted in erotic pleasure. Her partner kissed her again on the mouth, and his free arm wrapped around her waist to pull her closer. To feed his ego, she moaned and writhed around. However, her mind was elsewhere. She felt disconnected from her body, like she wasn't really the one experiencing any of the physical affect that Yusaku was giving her. She felt like she was watching from above, observing another woman going through these motions.

Not that Aoi didn't enjoy the attention. In fact, it was the opposite. She was extremely relieved to finally get some intimacy after having craving it for so long. But how was she supposed to feel about Yusaku saying that he *liked* her? Wasn't she meant to be jumping up and down for joy? Or at the very least, shouldn't she feel a mini burst of happiness in her chest?

She felt neither of those things.

She didn't even *care*, and that was the most upsetting part.

'I like you, Aoi.'

He said it again.

Still, she felt nothing.

Yet, she came apart in his arms as the tightening knot in her abdomen coiled and twisted until all she saw was white light. Despite the intense release her body enjoyed, her mind was going through somewhat of a crucial

realization about human contact - something that Yusaku had been trying to teach her this whole time, but she was too romantic to believe it: love and sex are not the same. At least, not to Yusaku. He could have sex with her, and make her feel all kinds of passion, but that didn't mean that he had feelings for her.

Like?

People liked flowers. And good food. And interesting books or films.

Aoi didn't want to settle for being *liked*.

Yusaku undid the buttons of her blouse quickly. Aoi was dumbfounded as he did this. That was fast. It was almost as if he was used to it. How many women had he undressed? Aoi's heart dropped, but she was too tired to cry or get angry. Why *should* she be upset? Yusaku wasn't her boyfriend. He was a seasonal lover, one who came by when he was horny and probably had no other options. What they shared was something more akin to a business transaction than love. He pleased her, and she did the same for him... That wasn't so bad. They both got something out of it.

Aoi realized that *she* was in the wrong for expecting more.

So rather than chase after him again, she was going to enjoy the fulfillment of what she had been desiring for so long. As long as she didn't get attached again, she figured that this was fine. Normally, Aoi thought of herself as unable to be intimate with someone that she didn't have feelings for. This time, however, she was simply too fatigued to care. This felt good. *He* felt good. Why not enjoy it? Who cares if they weren't together? She didn't anymore. She had given up, but she oddly wasn't sad about it. Yusaku had made himself clear from the beginning. At least he *liked* her.

At least she was *likeable*.

'You're so beautiful.' Yusaku whispered into her ear as he discarded her blouse. He was surprised (but not unhappily so) to find out that she wasn't

wearing a bra. He fondled her bare breasts and pushed her gently onto the mattress with his weight so that she was laying on her back.

'Take off your shirt.' she suggested with a hazy smile.

Yusaku obliged, and Aoi drank in the sight of his muscular, lean torso as he descended upon her with a flurry of open-mouthed kisses. Subconsciously, her hands roamed his back, imprinting onto her nerves every flex of his flesh as he moved around. His scent, she hoped, could be burnt to the back of her mind. She took in the sensual aroma of dry cedar. He smelled like a celebration, and she grew sentimental at the idea that she wasn't the only one who felt this way about him.

And Aoi didn't care to compete with other girls, because she didn't believe that she could ever win.

Who do you wear this cologne for? she wondered, *Who are you trying to impress?*

Yusaku trailed his hot mouth down her neck, past her collarbone, below the valley between her breasts, until finally settling right on top of her skirt. He unzipped that article of clothing and pulled down her underwear so that she was completely exposed to him. Aoi was nervous, but her brain fog prevented her from saying anything substantial. 'Yusaku...' she managed. 'What are you-'

The sensation of his tongue tasting her cut her off. She threw her head back and screamed. Her skin felt like it had been set on fire, and her hips squirmed as though trying to make sense of what she was feeling. Yusaku held her still by the waist, but Aoi tried to wriggle free of his grasp. This was beyond embarrassing, and the fact that she was enjoying this so much was even more humiliating. She was unable to even properly express her delight, alternating between sharp breaths in and high-pitched mewling.

Meanwhile, Yusaku was thoroughly enjoying pleasuring his dream girl. It was absolutely torture going through the past week, sitting so close to her during lunch hours, and yet being unable to embrace her. The tense glances

they exchanged didn't help this whatsoever. He tried to relive in his mind all those times when they were together in the past, but nothing compared to actually touching her in real-time. Her skin was so hot to touch that she melted him. The sounds of her losing herself to him was the most arousing call he'd ever experienced in his life. It was taking all of his willpower not to slide up against her and thrust into her, but he wanted to bring her to the point of no return before allowing himself the same release.

'Yu... Yusa...' Aoi struggled to speak. One hand came up to her mouth so that she could bite at a finger, while the other gripped her lover's wrist at her waist. She didn't want him to stop, but her brain could barely register what he was doing. His flat tongue slid up her slit repeatedly to produce a mind-numbingly arousing sensation that couldn't be replicated by penetration. But the fact that he was right between her legs, actually sampling her, was hotly mortifying. 'Yusaku... Yusaku...'

'Mm...'

'Please...' she squeaked. 'I'm disgusting. I-*mm*...'

Yusaku gave her one last languid lick before sliding up against her and entering her. Aoi tensed at the familiar feeling of him inside of her. The initial intrusion was sharp, and the first few thrusts were that so his member's girth pushed somewhat painfully against her walls. However, she quickly adjusted to him and the dull hurt turned into wanton desire. Especially considering that this time, Yusaku was slow and tantalizing in his movements. He thrusted his entire length in and out of her each time, groaning every instance that he had to pull back and repeat the motion. The feeling of her tightening around him not only gave him sinful pleasure, but the mental stimulation gave him swollen pride. *This* was what he'd been craving since they'd parted last: someone who wanted him, and who was willing to shamelessly showcase this desire.

Do I love her or do I like that she loves me?

This was a question that Yusaku asked himself every so often. It was also the question that prevented him from investigating his own feelings for her.

Sometimes, he strongly believed that he was in love with her. Other times, he wasn't so sure. She was an emotionally satisfying indulgence, but she was also terrifyingly real. It was infectious. She brought out in him what he saw in her; raw human feeling, illogical and satisfying.

As if that wasn't enough, Aoi spoke, 'Ah... Ah, Yusaku... It feels... Good...'

'How good?' he dared to ask. He hunched his back so that his head was low enough for him to nestle on top of her breasts. He kissed her warm skin as he tried to regain control of himself. He could barely gather his thoughts. He felt himself slipping into an emotional high, yet he couldn't fully comprehend the sentiments mixing together in his chest. He wanted to smile and scream despairingly at the same time, and he couldn't admit to himself why.

We will never work together... But I want it to work out.

'Yusaku... Yusaku...'

Yusaku slowed his movements, earning a frustrated hiss from his lover. Aoi entangled her fingers in his hair and pressed her lips against the side of his face, giving his cheek a long, drawn-out smooch. Her eyes shut to fight back the threat of tears as she ended the chaste kiss. The urge to show him affection tugged at her again, and she pressed her mouth to him once more as she inhaled his scent. Her heart was beating so fast with emotion that it was starting to show in her breathing, which was turning ragged and deep. She had so many feelings for him all at once that she didn't know how to deal with them. The added sentimentality of Yusaku having his way with her in the most gentle way thus far wasn't helping her sort herself out either. She wanted so badly to believe that he loved her and she was falling for her own perceived lie.

Yusaku pulled away to look into her eyes.

It always seems too good to be true in the moment: Yusaku's attention was solely on her, from his smouldering gaze burning tracks into her body to his fingers digging into her skin as he worked into her. Sex was enjoyable at the

emotional level for Aoi insofar as it was the only time in which she could guarantee that Yusaku only had eyes were only on her for. But once it was all over, she felt like shit. In the past, even the aftermath was satisfying. Aoi would lay comfortably on top of him, ear-to-chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. She never wanted that to end either.

This time, however, wasn't at all like that.

Aoi reached up to grip his shoulders, dragging him back down so that his face was buried into the curve of her neck.

She didn't want him to look at her.

That was when he knew that something had gone terribly wrong.

Abruptly, Yusaku ceased his movements. Slowly, he withdrew himself from inside of her, and Aoi gasped when she felt him leave her. Then, she loosened her hold on his shoulders and Yusaku lifted his head to stare right at her face. He wanted to meet her eyes, but she averted her gaze. However, he could see the pent-up emotion coming up in unshed tears at her waterline. Without thinking, he kissed her cheek. A tear fell from the corner of her eye and she quickly wiped it away. Yusaku felt her move. He cupped her face and tilted her so that she was forced to look at him. Her eyes were sad, but she tried to smile.

'Don't pretend.' Yusaku spoke softly. 'I know you're upset.'

'No...' she lied, palming his chest with one hand to gesture that he should get off. He obliged, and she sat up. Yusaku looked away while Aoi gathered her clothes to dress herself. Once that was done, she walked towards the door.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to take a shower.' Aoi replied. She was exhausted. And she felt weird, considering that she was slick with sweat and probably a dozen other bodily fluids. It didn't feel right. She wanted to be clean.

She wanted to be *clean*.

She hopped into the shower, turning up the temperature to scalding. The tears fell now, but they mixed with the water so she felt safe. That if Yusaku were to come in and see her, he wouldn't know just how upset she was. Not that he could anyway as she had locked the door. Who knows? Maybe he had left the apartment and gone home already. Whatever was happening outside of the bathroom, Aoi resolved not to give Yusaku the satisfaction of seeing how badly he affected her.

Aoi could still feel him moving inside her. Try as she might to hate it, the truth was that she wanted to do that again. She enjoyed both the physical and emotion dimensions of it, but she couldn't reconcile those two sensations. It felt good, but it also felt bad in equal measure. Aoi's heart jumped for joy at the love he was giving her, but then she'd remember that she wasn't special and she'd be hurt all over again. He felt so good inside of her, but that pleasure would become pain at the thought of him doing it with someone else.

With a squeak, Aoi recoiled from the shower head's stream. Steam prevented her from seeing well, but she could feel her skin burning up. She was so lost in thought that she had lost track of how long she'd been in there. Her body couldn't handle any more heat.

Grudgingly, she left the shower and wrapped herself in a bathrobe. It was too big for her and thus drooped at the shoulders, exposing more skin than was necessary. Normally, Aoi would be conscious about such things, but she presumed that she was all alone in the apartment now. Yusaku must have gone home. He wouldn't waste time leaving.

Instead of going back to her room, Aoi went out to the rooftop patio. The city lights were beautiful in the evening. She wanted to watch them. She sat down on one of the round, wooden surfaces that served as seating. Akira always had an eye for classy but modern furniture, and the patio aesthetic perfectly reflected that. The night air was chilly, but Aoi didn't mind. It was kind of pleasant, especially after feeling almost feverish just a while ago.

She palmed her womb.

What am I going to do?

'Hey...'

Surprised, Aoi swivelled around to see Yusaku standing by the entrance to the patio. He had his clothes on and wore a sheepish expression on his face. His green eyes were jewel-toned under the cool light of the moon, giving him a handsome glow. But rather than admire him, Aoi turned her back to him. Her chest tightened painfully. She hated him. It was tortuous for her to pine after someone she couldn't have.

She heard his footsteps approach her. Her posture stiffened. What was he going to do? What did he want to talk about now? Why didn't he just leave?

'Can I sit beside you?'

Aoi said nothing, but scooted over anyway. Yusaku took a seat next to her and looked at her. She turned her attention to him politely and gave him a soft smile. He didn't buy it. But fearing that he would pry into her heart again, Aoi spoke, 'How are you going to get home?'

Yusaku's eyes widened. 'Huh?'

'It's late.' she explained as she crossed her legs defensively. 'Do you want me to call you a cab?'

'Oh...' Yusaku rubbed the back of his neck. 'I wasn't intending to leave yet. I wanted to talk to you, but if you need me to go, then I will.'

Aoi's hands balled into tight fists on her lap. She wasn't expecting him to say that he had plans of staying for longer. To do what? To talk about what? He was always quick to get rid of her once they'd done the deed, so-

Oh.

Now it made sense.

'*Ah*... I'm sorry. You didn't finish, did you?'

Yusaku's cheeks burned. 'N-No, that's-'

'Sorry about that. I'm a little tired. Maybe I can do something for you later.'

'No, I-'

'I feel terrible! After you satisfied me so much...'

'Aoi-'

'Don't worry, you'll get what you came here for-'

'*Aoi*.' Yusaku raised his voice. 'Enough already.'

Aoi's jaw tightened. 'Then what do you want?' she demanded tightly.

'I'm always scared to tell you how I feel about you.' he admitted, reaching for her hand. She didn't pull away. 'It's hard for me to say such words out loud. But... The truth is that I do love you, and I've been in love with you for a while now.'

Aoi scoffed, wriggling her hand free from his. 'Stop it. You're just making me fun of me.'

'I'm not. I mean it.' he tried to hold her hand again, but she moved away. 'Aoi...' he gazed into her eyes and was surprised to see that they were full of anger.

'I don't want you anymore.' her voice cracked from emotion. 'I don't want to be anything more than friends because you're so much kinder to me when all we have is friendship. You've proven that to me recently. Or maybe... We're even less than that. I don't know.' she crossed her arms over her chest to try and regain control over her trembling body. She suddenly felt sickeningly cold all over, and it wasn't from the atmosphere. 'Whatever we are at school, I like it. With so much distance between us, I know that I can't

touch you. But that same distance is what keeps us from hurting each other. You don't feel threatened by me, so you don't reject me.'

Yusaku's eyes turned sad. 'That's not true... I tried being friends with you this past week, but it doesn't work. I want more. It's unsatisfying having you next to me when you aren't mine.'

'And whose fault is that?! You pushed me away each and every time I tried to get close to you! You don't want me, you've *never* wanted me!'

'That's not true.'

'Be quiet!' she massaged her temples and shut her eyelids. 'Your voice is grating! Ah... My head. It hurts... I...' a wave of nausea washed over her and she cursed her pregnancy. Fuck this. She was having the most important confrontation of her evening and she couldn't focus because of her hormones running haywire. The only thing that was clear to her was that she wanted nothing more than to punch all Yusaku's teeth out.

'Aoi...' Yusaku slid closer to her and wrapped her in a tight embrace. He tucked her head under her chin rubbed her back soothingly. Rather than relax, Aoi just tensed up.

'Let go of me!' she pushed him away harshly, and immediately felt a pang of pain in her abdomen. She hunched over, her entire form shaking at the sharpness that felt like it was going to split her in two.

Yusaku pulled the top part of her robe up so that it recovered her back. With the sudden movement, it had slid downwards, exposing more of her skin to the unforgiving breeze of the air. Afterwards, he leaned down and kissed the side of her face, his hands moving up and down her arms in an effort to stroke her into calmness. He somewhat succeeded; Aoi's muscles loosened, and she didn't feel like throwing up anymore. But her heart was still beating furiously. She was pissed, but didn't have the strength to impose her wrath on her companion.

And, truthfully, she felt a tinge of happiness that Yusaku was actually caring for her.

But she wanted to fight the urge to give into it.

'You should get to bed.' Yusaku whispered. 'Get some rest.'

'Shut up.' she snipped. 'Don't act like you care.'

'I do care about you... I love you.'

'*No*, you don't love me.' she insisted, pushing against him as she sobbed and trembled uncontrollably. Yusaku refused to let her go although Aoi was putting all her remaining power into trying to get away from him. 'You don't want me. You don't care about me. You hate me, you *hate* me-'

Yusaku grabbed her by the waist and pressed her against his chest. Then, he held her by the back to prevent her from escaping. He could still feel her shaking, but his actions effectively silenced her. There was a quiet pause, broken only by a small whimper from Aoi. She then buried her face into his shirt, and he could feel that she was crying.

He felt his whole body go numb. He hated it when she suffering. He always disliked human suffering, but something in the way Aoi dealt with pain hit him in the most agonizingly sensitive places. Even when he barely knew her, when her mind was taken over by the Knights of Hanoi... Her screams hollowed him out so that it was physically sickening him to have to listen to her enduring so much torment. Her tears were no different. That was why even when he rejected her in the past, he could never look at her properly.

'You don't love me...' she muttered into the black fabric. 'You're such a liar... I know you don't love me...'

'I love you.' he reassured her as he swallowed a hard lump at his throat. Having to say those words over and over was taking an emotional toll on him. He meant it every time he said it, which is why he hardly did.

Although it was a verbal confession, it felt like every nerve in his body was submitting to Aoi.

'You don't...'

'I *love* you.'

'I know you don't...'

'I do. I love you.' his hands left her body to cup her face as he leaned in to kiss her on the mouth. He gave her a deep, loving kiss that was erotic as it was sentimental. Aoi returned the gesture and she gradually stopped trembling. When their lips left each other, he repeated his earlier proposition, 'Let's get you to bed. I know you're tired.'

Aoi didn't do or say anything back, but allowed Yusaku to drag her to her own bedroom. There, she undid her robe and hung it on a chair before dressing herself in the white shirt and shorts that she usually wore around the house. She climbed onto the bed, settling her head onto one of the many pillows she had. Yusaku sat on the foot of her mattress, watching her, flashing her a smile that warmed her freezing heart. He was so comforting when he was kind to her. Aoi didn't think that she could survive another bout of iciness from him. He was both her greatest comfort, and worst enemy.

'It's late.' Aoi said quietly. 'We have school tomorrow... You can stay here, if you'd like.'

'Thanks.' Yusaku smiled. 'But your brother might be home any minute now.'

'He's not coming home tonight.'

Yusaku's grin grew. 'Oh?'

'Mhmm...'

'Then I'll stay.' he reached over to caress her calves, hoping to relax her. Aoi sighed and allowed him to touch her, secretly pleased that she was going to make up to him. She was about to try and fall asleep until Yusaku continued, 'Is that what you want?'

'I don't care.'

Yusaku crawled onto the bed on all fours. He approached Aoi, who refused to react to his presence. That didn't deter him. He caressed the side of her face with finger before saying, 'You shouldn't get so worked up... It's bad for the baby.'

Aoi didn't have any strong feelings about the fact that he was bringing up her pregnancy. She hadn't told him so that she could protect him from donning the responsibility, but she supposed that there was no use hiding it now. As usual, Yusaku had worked it out. Might as well let it all out now. 'Do you even want it?'

Yusaku's stomach dropped. Aoi didn't deny it this time. So she really was pregnant. What the hell? *What the hell*? Yusaku wanted to scream, but he kept his cool. There was no use in further agitating his already pissed-off lover. 'I want what you want.'

'I don't know what I want... I'm scared.'

Me too, Yusaku wanted to confess, but decided that he needed to play the part of the stronger individual to support Aoi. Evidently, his mind games had already taken their toll on the fatigued Aoi, mentally and emotionally. Plus, her pregnancy was inevitably going to wreck her body. He couldn't bear to think of her getting crushed under the weight of all the crap she had to deal with. At the very least, he didn't want to add to her stress.

'Yusaku... What do you want from me?'

He tilted his head, confused. 'What do you mean?'

'Why are you telling me that you love me?'

'Because I do.'

'You hate me.'

'I love you.' he was persistent. Exhaustion was creeping up on him and had the courage to lay beside her on mattress, on top of the covers. He faced her with sincere eyes, and Aoi studied him for any sign that he was lying to her. But the same feeling he gave her when he was lost in the throes of passion inside of her was the exact same feeling he was giving her now. He looked at her like the world around her didn't exist. His expression was so soft that she remembered why she always knew that he had the biggest heart.

Subconsciously, she reached and brushed her fingertips against his lips. She didn't break eye contact with him, though Yusaku's emerald orbs twinkled with a sentimentality that surprised her. Maybe she wasn't mistaken about him all this time. Perhaps he did love her.

Did she care?

'Aoi...?'

'Do you hate me because I got pregnant?'

Yusaku was taken aback by that question. 'Why would I hate you for that?'

'Because I know you don't want to have a baby with me.'

He inhaled deeply before responding, 'I was irresponsible. I'm to blame for this.'

'Well... I shared that responsibility with you.'

Yusaku smiled. 'Don't beat yourself up over it. What's done is done.'

'And you still love me?'

'How could I not be in love with you?' he caught her wrist and kissed it. 'My beautiful baby...'

'I love you... Yusaku...'

Aoi's heart warmed pleasantly that evening. For the first time in a long while, she felt truly loved and wanted. The emotional baggage she carried with her in silence unloaded and she felt somewhat healthier. Whether it was because the truth was finally out or Yusaku reciprocating her feelings was not clear. At any rate, Aoi decided that she didn't have to figure that out tonight.

She just wanted to sleep deeply, without thought or care for anything other than her own peace.

In the morning, she would tackle whatever problem arose.

'Don't leave me... Not tonight.'

'I won't, Aoi. Not tomorrow either.'

Thank you guys for the overwhelming response I received last chapter! Thank you as well for reading and reviewing this story! I just realized how many chapters I've written and am so appreciative of how patient and supportive you all are. I can't fully express just how encouraging your support is.

By the way, I am thinking of beginning an AU story for this pairing. Is that something you guys would be interested in reading? Or would you rather my efforts be focused on this story? Please let me know in a message if possible!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Yujo0147, thank you so much for your continued support and very kind words! You really warmed my heart with the last line of your review. I love this couple too, but I hope they interact more in the official series. Otherwise, it really is wasted potential.

Aniki, thank you so much for all your support! Aoi's fluctuating hormones during her pregnancy will definitely be greatly affecting Yusaku, who has to learn how to deal with her mood changes if he wants to prove to her that he loves her. Aoi may have been complacent this chapter, but she will not be so quick to fully cave into him.

Guest, thank you for your review! Aoi did something different this chapter insofar as she stopped it. I wanted to show how she's grown after reflecting on her sexual relationship with Yusaku, and I'm going to be highlighting how Yusaku changes in response to Aoi's newfound desire to impose boundaries.

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review! I hope the fact that the events of this chapter unfolded differently was a good surprise!

Guest, thank you for your review! I never thought of having Flame thinking that the humans are crazy, but that is interesting and I think I will definitely write that into the story now! Akira will also be finding out about the pregnancy soon. Thank you for your kind words!

25. Burning

'What are you thinking about?'

'Hm?' Takeru turned his attention to his Ignis, which was speaking from the Duel Disk on top of his bedside table. In his white tracksuit, Takeru lounged lazily on his mattress for the duration of the evening, eyes glued to his ceiling as his mind wandered. It was morning now, and he was still in the same position without having gotten so much as a wink's worth of sleep. He was thinking about a million things that stressed him out and ate at him.

Flame was usually an annoying sack of shit, but at the moment, Takeru was glad that the AI tore him out of his stupor.

'I asked you what you're thinking about.'

'Nothing.'

'Liar.'

Takeru sighed. 'It's *nothing*.'

'L-I-A-R.'

'*OK*!' Takeru snapped before rubbing his face. *Ughhhhh*! Flame could be more sympathetic in his questioning... The Ignis could already see that Takeru was suffering, so what did it have to be so hasty? This approach didn't at all encourage Takeru to open up. In fact, he was closing in on himself even more. If it weren't for the fact that he had no one else to talk to, he wouldn't have caved in. But at this point he was desperate, and Flame was a comfortable partner to speak with. 'I'm just trying to tell myself that I did the right thing.'

'The right thing? With what?'

'With Yusaku and Zaizen.' he clarified. 'When I told Yusaku to just figure out his feelings for her already.'

'Oh...' Flame crossed its arms and squinted its yellow orbs. 'Well... I would say that you did. The Dark Ignis' master needed someone human to encourage him to face his innermost feelings head-on.'

'I know that. But...' Takeru shut his eyelids. 'I feel so... empty. And upset. With *myself*: how could I feel this way for Zaizen, knowing how she feels for Yusaku? And how he feels for her...'

'Your morality is not determined by what you feel, but rather, what you *do*. Your actions speak volumes about your fortitude.'

'But I didn't do anything.'

'That's not true. You did the most selfless thing: to condemn yourself to heartbreak so that your friends may find happiness with each other... Truly chivalrous of you, Soulburner.' Flame commended its master.

That was a nice thought. Takeru liked to think of himself as a crusader for justice, a warrior that made those around him hopeful. Part of being that saviour-type soldier was adopting a selfless attitude. That was precisely what he tried to apply to recent events in his life, but he found that rather than feel fulfilled by his decision to cast aside his feelings for Aoi, he now felt follow and miserable.

'There are so many girls, especially at school. You're bound to fall for another.' Flame continued, as if reading its master's mind. 'Zaizen Aoi is just one out of many.'

'She's the one that counts.'

'What's so special about her?'

'I don't know.' he admitted softly, his chest tightening painfully at the thought of Aoi. 'When I think of her, I get this pressure in my heart. And when I think of her smile, this pressure makes me happy. But when I think of how she looks at Yusaku, this pressure feels like it could kill me.' he grit his teeth. 'It feels like I'm being torn apart.'

Flame tilted its head, confused. 'But you're completely intact.'

'Am I? I'm not so sure anymore.'

'Yusaku... Yusaku...'

Yusaku groaned, clearly irritated by the voice disturbing his slumber. He could feel the heat of the sun warming his body pleasantly, signalling the beginning of the morning. Didn't he have school today? He should probably get up. But this bed was so soft and inviting... Maybe he could skip his classes. Come on! He hardly ever got a full night's rest, so the fact that he genuinely wanted to sleep was something that should be celebrated, right? He should be left alone to

'Yusaku... Wake up...'

'Be quiet.' he snapped before rolling over to the side, back facing the direction of the voice. Then, he felt a pair of knead his shoulders. He sighed, pleased by the massage he was receiving. It was somewhat painful, but also incredibly relieving. He was aware that his muscles were tightly knotted together, but he was so used to being on-edge all the time that he often forgot about taking care of his body. 'Ah...'

'Does that feel good?'

'Yes...'

'Hehe...'

Yusaku reached up behind him to place his hand over the one that was attending to him. He brought it up to his lips and gave it a chaste but long kiss. His chest tightened and he wished that he would never have to go another day without knowing how this warm patch of skin felt against his. Afterwards, he held it by the side of his cheek, curling his fingers around it tightly. Inhaling the scent of lavender, a small graced his lips and he

murmured warmly, 'Aoi...' his eyes fluttered open and bright emeralds gazed at her with a hundred different emotions.

He couldn't believe that he was waking up to her, and that all their truths were out in the open now.

It felt *nice*.

'Good morning.' Aoi greeted cheerfully. She pried her hand away from his and poked him playfully on the nose. 'Get up, sleepyhead.'

'Sorry.' he cleared his throat before sitting upright. 'I completely forgot where I was.' he examined the room he was in, which was wonderfully unfamiliar. Soft, pastel colours painted the modern furniture with an aesthetically pleasing, feminine maturity. His attention was then brought to Aoi, who was reclined on her pillows beside him, dressed in an incomplete school uniform. She had only donned the white blouse, dark skirt, and high socks. '*Shit*.' he cursed aloud. 'I don't have my uniform. I have to run back home.' he explained in a hurry as he attempted to roll off the bed.

But Aoi reached for him with a desperate 'Wait!' only managing to cling onto a pinch of fabric from his shirt. It ultimately slipped away from her hands. She felt her heart freeze just then, even though Yusaku halted his movements and looked back at her, clearly awaiting what she had to say. The confusing part was that she didn't know what she wanted to say. She just didn't want him to leave.

He needed to leave, though. He wanted to leave. What was she doing, keeping him?

'Aoi?'

'U-Umm...' she stammered, wracking her brains for any excuse to keep him by her side even though she knew that she shouldn't. 'Do you have to go now? You just woke up.'

Yusaku flashed her a small smile that he didn't even realize had begun to form. Aoi was taken aback by that, and was suddenly very self-conscious. She began to collect herself in a sitting position, but Yusaku crawled towards her and climbed on top, pinning her down with his form. Aoi's hands palmed his biceps and she stared right into his eyes as he showcased that same rare, handsome smile. 'You can just ask me to stay, you know. But... You have to ask nicely.'

'Please stay.' Aoi obeyed. She would have done anything that he wanted her to do to stop him from leaving. Maybe it was the pregnancy, or perhaps she was worried that the peace between them would crumble as soon as he left, but Aoi couldn't bear the thought of him leaving her right now. She reached up to cup his face, drawing him closer to her. 'Stay with me...'

He went without resistance. He locked her in a deep kiss in which he himself was entirely lost. Aoi's hands travelled from his face down his neck, up and over his collarbones and taut abdominals until she could slip underneath his shirt. Getting the message, Yusaku tore away from her and knelt so that he could remove his top. Sadly, Aoi couldn't properly drink in the sight of his impressive built for he immediately kissed her again, more passionately than before. He fumbled with the buttons of her blouse, but he managed well. Before long, it was completely undone, exposing familiar skin sheeted in thin, blue lace. His mouth traveled down her chin, along her neck, until he settled in the hollow centre of her collarbone, where he nipped lightly at her flesh.

'Yusaku...' Aoi whimpered as she spread her legs and pushed up against him. He stiffened at the contact, but quickly got the message. His hands immediately reached for his belt, the metallic sounds of it unbuckling exciting his beloved even further. She bunched up her skirt to her waist and pulled her panties to the side before begging him, 'Please... Inside me...'

'Yeah.' he grunted in understanding as he desperately unzipped his pants. After he pulled his trousers and boxers down, he gave her a wet kiss as he slid into her.

Aoi tore her mouth away from his and let out a breathy moan. Her hands found their way to his back, raking her nails down his spine as he thrust in and out of her in a steady rhythm that sent waves of electricity all over her body. Still wanting more of her, Yusaku hooked his arms underneath her knees and pushed upwards, folding her legs so that the tops of her thighs were pressed up against her chest. A shaky sigh left him, and he revelled in the tight warmth around him.

'Ah...' she whimpered. 'Ah, Yusaku... You're too... *Anh*...'

Aoi's fingers were now digging painfully into his skin, but he the pain didn't deter him whatsoever. He hissed at the sensation of his tip grazing against her womb each and every time he pushed back into her. As if that wasn't enough, Aoi's cries of ecstasy were accompanied by the wet sounds of their lovemaking. Yusaku was determined not to miss a beat, wanting to hear how good he made her feel in an endless loop that stroked his ego. By now, his body was slick with sweat and he felt like he was burning up from the inside out.

Where was Aoi? He wanted to hold her. Even though she was right within his grasp, she felt so far away.

He let go of her legs to snake his arms around her body, pulling her up to him so that he could feel every curve of her form as she writhed beneath him. Her lips were whispering sweet, seductive words into his ear, and the scent of her lavender perfume was overpowering. She was embracing him with trembling limbs, and it was evident that she wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

And yet still, she felt so far away.

He wanted to be closer to her, close enough so that they couldn't separate even if they tried. Miraculously, he felt a tiny glimpse of that. The reality that she was carrying what was his, and that they had willingly created this budding life together, satiated his desire to imprint himself on her and vice versa. What he could never say in words somehow transcended borders put

up by his own insecurities, and his body did what his mind tried not to reveal: that he loved her and wanted to be with her.

Aoi was pregnant.

He should't want the baby.

He *doesn't* want the baby.

But, a part of him did. A part of him genuinely wanted her to have his child, and that scared him. Logically, he should want her to terminate the pregnancy so that they could both move on with their lives: school and friends and responsibilities in their adult lives that had nothing to do with family-making. And yet, as he moved inside of her, inhaling her scent and kissing her skin, he couldn't bear the thought of another man doing this to her. He wanted her to himself forever, and he wanted to mark her *now*. This desire lacked rational thought and he was aware that it stemmed purely from emotion. Regardless, these were his real feelings. He could do nothing to shake them off, especially when their intimacy amplified these sentiments.

'Ah!' Aoi's torso arched bow-taut as she turned her head to the side and opened her mouth in a silent scream. Her neck was completely exposed to her lover, who instinctively licked along it as she came apart. He groaned when he felt her pulsate around him, and he couldn't keep himself from spilling into her. He crumbled, collapsing his weight onto her as he refused to release her from his tight embrace.

So they remained that way for the longest time, skin-to-skin, heart-to-heart, until Aoi cupped his face and kissed him on the mouth. He gave into her, parting his lips and allowing her to taste him. She was sensual and chaste at the same time; seductive and innocent, lusty and loving. All thought had left Yusaku's mind. Only the softness of Aoi's lips registered in his mind. The rest - the *world* - could go to shit.

When they were later laying side by side on the bed, facing each other, they were utterly silent. And yet, a million unspoken feelings were shared in the

atmosphere between them. Yusaku hoped that the love and trust he had towards her were effectively communicated in the way his emerald eyes deepened to the point where one could get lost in them. Aoi felt like she was looking into a bottomless ocean brimming with summertime sunlight. It was warm. *He* felt warm and inviting and wonderful.

Making love... She could make him love her in this one, temporary pocket of time.

But Aoi wasn't a naive girl. She knew that her magic wasn't strong enough to keep him. The spell was always going to come undone. He was going to wake up and realize that he never loved her. Then, he'd reject her and make her feel smaller than a newborn microbe. She couldn't survive another round of dismissal. She'd rather take charge of the situation and move it along herself. She had to let him know that she wasn't stupid, that she wasn't going to be fooled, and that he could no longer toy with her.

'Are all the other girls in love with you too?'

Yusaku's smile fell. With a deep frown, he retorted, 'There are no other girls.'

'Oh. Right.' she shrugged, but it was obvious that she didn't believe him.

This greatly bothered Yusaku, who thought that he was doing his best to start being a good guy to her. Even when he was an asshole, he didn't think that he gave her any reason to think that he was screwing around with other girls behind her back. Why would she-

You're not a special girl. I won't cherish what happened between you and I.

Yusaku's stomach twisted guiltily. He had said those words to her quite some time ago. And until recently, he kept on giving her the feeling that she had no place in his heart. How could he blame her? He was the one forced her trust to die out.

Aoi had every reason to doubt his romantic intentions.

But still... Still, he wanted to forget all of that. He wanted her to love him again wholeheartedly, shamelessly, with complete trust and youthful persistence. He missed that about her. This guarded version of her was unsatisfying.

'Hey...' he reached out to caress the side of her face with his fingers. 'I love you.'

Aoi's heart jumped. She melted just then, but she didn't want him to know that. 'Mhmm...' she hummed, taking hold of his hand and kissing it. 'I love you too.' she returned, and she meant it - she just wasn't entirely convinced that he did. Yusaku sensed this and was about to say something, but she began to sit up. 'I'm going to take a shower again.' she laughed. 'I can't go to school right after messing around with you.'

The heat rushed to Yusaku's face. He cleared his throat before beginning to stand up as well. He needed to dress up, go home, and waltz into school in his uniform. 'Yeah... I should get going as well.'

Aoi went numb. There it was again; the familiar sting of Yusaku walking away from her. He was going to leave her apartment and forget everything that happened between them. The next time they'd speak, they'd be complete strangers, and he'd hate her for wanting to be anything more.

'Alright... Have a nice day.' she said calmly, but Yusaku sensed that something was amiss in her tone.

'I don't want to leave you.' he reassured her. 'It's not like that.'

'I know.' she lied. 'Don't worry about me. Get going already.'

With a sigh, Yusaku made his way over to her and pulled her into a tight embrace. 'I love you.' he declared and Aoi stiffened in his arms. 'I've never shown it properly, but I do love you.'

She didn't respond.

'I know you don't believe me.' he continued. 'Tell me what I can do to convince you. I love you.' he held her tighter. 'I love you...'

Aoi relaxed. Her muscles loosened and nuzzled her face into his chest. He was warm. He was so, so warm. And she was so cold inside. She wanted to melt into him, but her broken heart didn't have the strength to take the plunge. She felt light-headed. The ground beneath her was shaky, and her vision was turning to blank white. She shut her eyes to try and regain composure, but that only threw her completely off balance. She stumbled, but thankfully, Yusaku was able hold her up.

'Aoi!' he cried. 'What's wrong?!'

She wanted to tell him not to worry, but she oddly didn't have the strength to. Her whole body felt like it was free falling, but she was held still by her lover. Was she outside? Was it winter? Was it snowing? She was freezing. Her bones were icing over. Her eyelids were heavy and she couldn't stay conscious much longer. But Yusaku was here, he'd figure something out.

Right?

He'd take care of her.

She trusted him.

'Aoi!' Yusaku repeated, supporting her weight with an arm around her waist while his free hand cupped her face. He tried to get her to look at him, but she wasn't responsive. Her skin was so hot, she could burn him. Her visage paled suddenly, and she broke out into a cold sweat. 'Aoi, stop it!' he pressed. 'Don't play games with me... Aoi, Aoi-'

Do you want this baby?

Emma Bessho loved coffee.

She couldn't commit to men, nor could she commit to proper working hours... But a cup (or two) of coffee in the morning? Now that, she had to have *religiously*. This ritual stipulated that she had to have it at the same cafe every day, at the very same time: 8:30 AM. She'd see the same people in the same moods, ordering the same drinks. This was her routine. So if even one aspect of this routine was different, she was quick to notice.

This explained why she easily made out the strange presence of a tall, broad figure hunched over one of the tables. It was clearly a man, but Emma couldn't identify him at first because of the oversized hoodie he was wearing that was pulled over his head. He looked like that silhouette from *Hang Man* come to life. Courageously, Emma walked over to him. Maybe she could strike up a conversation. She wasn't scared of strangers anyway.

Except this person wasn't a stranger.

It was only when he lifted his head up to rub his face that Emma recognized him for who he was.

'Akira!' she squealed happily, sitting down in front of him even though he never invited her.

Her intrusion was unwelcome. Akira rolled his eyes, groaned, and signalled for her to hush by pressing a stiff finger against his pursed lips.

'Secret's safe with me.' Emma winked.

'*Nothing* is ever safe with you.' Akira shot back.

'Hehe...' she smiled. 'Well, you're with me now... So you have no choice but to trust me.'

'Lucky me.' he bit out sarcastically.

'Anyway... What are you doing here? I didn't think you'd be the type to come to a casual café like this. You always struck me as one of those hotel-lobby businessmen.'

'Precisely. This isn't my style, which is why I decided to go here. I didn't think I'd bump into anyone I knew.'

'You clearly don't know me.'

'I wasn't thinking about you. You're not worth the energy.'

Emma's smile tightened. Akira's words cut her, but she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of seeing her upset. Whatever. She supposed she deserved it anyway, considering that she burnt him badly the last time they saw each other: they had sex in his bedroom, in which he confessed his love for her, and she left in the morning without even a text explaining why she left him in the dust. Emma thought that she had made it clear in the past that they could never realistically work. It wasn't personal - Emma didn't want a relationship with anyone at this point in time. But Akira was so high-strung, so ready to settle down that he needed a partner who could see the value in a family-oriented lifestyle.

Emma wasn't that woman.

If only Akira wouldn't hold that against her.

'Alright, Akira... Don't be a grumpy cat.' she giggled and poked him playfully on the nose. 'What's wrong with you?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me.'

'No.' Akira was adamant. 'But what I will do is hire you.'

The cyber treasure hunter tilted her head quizzically. 'Hire me?'

'Yes... I need you to look into what Aoi's been doing.'

'Huh?' Emma almost burst out laughing in discomfort. 'Are you serious? Aren't you her brother? Shouldn't you just ask her?'

'She won't tell me anything. I don't know what's wrong with her.' he sighed. 'She's been acting so strange lately.'

'Have you thought about just talking to her about it?' Emma winced. 'You know... Like how a *normal* older brother would?'

'I *raised* her. She's not just my little sister. She's my daughter, my world. I've done everything for her. And she hates me for it.'

Thank you everyone for the overwhelming reception last chapter! I truly cannot thank you all enough for the encouragement you give me. Thanks again for your constant support, and I hope to hear your thoughts on this chapter!

Thank you as well for the encouragement of the AU idea. I haven't worked out all the kinks of the plot, but the essential idea is as follows: Yusaku can only remember bits and pieces of a traumatic event in his adolescence that still haunts him in his adulthood. In order to learn the truth by gaining access to Akira Zaizen, who serves as Security Manager to the company behind the incident, Yusaku begins a relationship with Aoi Zaizen. But what Yusaku didn't anticipate was that Aoi would have an agenda of her own that could seriously undermine Yusaku's quest.

In short, Yusaku seeks to fully regain his memories of his trauma, but Aoi works against this goal. I hope to hear what you guys think of this idea! It isn't an AU that drastically takes away from the original plot of the series, but there will certainly be differences. I will try to the best of my abilities to keep the characters true to their original personalities.

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Yujo0147, thank you for your kind reviews and continued support! Thank you as well for the encouragement on the AU. You are honestly

so encouraging and I cannot thank you enough for how much support you've continued to give me!

Aniki, thank you for your review and continued support! There isn't any more secret-keeping, but Yusaku still has to prove to Aoi that he is someone she can trust. Thank you as well for your support on the AU, I hope that it will be an enjoyable read! Thank you so much for all the wonderful support you give me!

Guest, thank you for your review! Interesting about the nickname irony... Even I didn't catch that at first haha! Thank you for saying that you would read my stories, those words are so encouraging! Thank you!

Guest, thank you for your review! I envision the same dynamic as well. Thank you for your support on the AU, and I hope to hear your thoughts on the description above!

Guest, thank you for your review! Yusaku was able to convince Aoi that he didn't lie in that moment. He still has to convince her that his feelings for her are unwavering, and that he isn't going to reject her again. You're also right in that Aoi will be more emotional about Yusaku, perhaps because of the pregnancy. That will complicate things for him, but he has to work through it to prove himself. Thank you for your support on the AU!

Guest, thank you for your review!

26. Woman Up

Staccato beeping forced Aoi's consciousness back into full swing. Her eyes struggled to open, the room was spinning, and she was feverish: but Yusaku's panicked punching of the buttons on his cellphone caught her attention. Yusaku was supporting her by the waist with one arm, while the other was holding onto his device. It took her only a moment to realize what was going on. Yusaku was calling an ambulance. This seemed to be a habit of his when he didn't know what to do. But today, Aoi would have none of it.

'Don't.' her tone was stern as she swiped at Yusaku's hand, knocking the cellphone onto the floor. This miffed Yusaku, who didn't have much spare money to replace the device if anything happened to it. However, considering her current predicament, he didn't think it was wise to get upset with her. Instead, he looked at her with quizzical eyes that thinly masked frustration. 'They'll call Onii-sama.'

'That's fine.' he pressed. 'I need to get you medical attention. I don't know-'

'No. Please.'

'Aoi-'

'I don't want to go.' she pleaded. 'Please, *please*-'

'You need a doctor.'

'*Please*. Don't. Onii-sama will find out I'm pregnant.'

Yusaku finally understood what Aoi was so fearful of. After a pause, he grudgingly let out a sigh and hooked his free arm underneath her knees, picking her up clean off the floor. If she were feeling better, she would have squeaked or at least tried to be playful. At the moment, she was numb. She felt lifeless, like a doll made out of jelly. Yusaku could have flung her around the room like a stuffed animal and she still wouldn't feel a thing. She was exhausted. All she wanted to do was lay on her bed.

Thankfully, Yusaku didn't have to be told what to do. He instinctively brought her to her mattress, laying her down carefully with her head on top of the various pillows sitting by the headboard.

'Thank you.' she whispered.

'Don't mention it.' he replied before picking up his phone from where it landed on her rug. He tucked it into his pocket and sighed. Afterwards, he spoke again, 'You need a doctor. I'm not equipped to treat you.'

'It's fine...' she giggled hollowly. Yusaku knew that she was just trying to appease him, so he forced his muscles to somewhat relax. When he did that, he noticed that Aoi herself calmed down. It touched him that she was concerned about his wellbeing, but he wanted to focus on her own physical state.

'You're burning up.' he pointed out. 'You need help.'

'No... I feel like this sometimes. I think it's because of the pregnancy.'

'I don't think these symptoms are normative.'

'Oh?' Aoi questioned playfully, *bitterly*. 'Are the other pregnant girls not as sick as me?'

'Will you *shut up* about that already?' he finally snapped with angry eyes. 'There are no other girls.'

Aoi did as she was told. Her lips were sealed. After giving him a long, hard look, she turned to her side so that her back was facing him. She couldn't look at him for much longer. His image made her sad. They had just messed around again. He finished, so he was effectively done with her. She was convinced that he was only staying so long because she collapsed. She hated it whenever he pretended to care about her. It gave her hope. She wanted reality, no matter how painful it was. The truth was what she believed she deserved. This cruel lie, wherein he pretended to care for her, was beyond evil at this point.

Yusaku sighed heavily. Knowing Aoi couldn't see him, he threw his arms up in the air and contorted his mouth in a silent scream. *Fuck!* he mouthed to the ceiling. Nevertheless, aware that he fabricated Aoi's insecurities regarding him, he decided to step up to the challenge. He made his way over to her, climbed on top of the bed to join her, and then wrapped her in a tight embrace from behind. His chest pressed against her back and he tucked her head under his chin.

Surprisingly, Aoi pushed against him, as if to signal to him to hold her closer - so he did, pulling her to him as tightly as he could.

'You're the only girl.' he reassured in a soft, uncharacteristically gentle voice. 'I promise.'

'Whatever.' she tried to come off as flippant, but her voice broke. Try as she might to resist being lured back into love with Yusaku, her heart was mending in a painfully beautiful way. She was so tired of being hurt by him, but she'd be lying if she denied that there were remnants of her that longed for him. Those same shards of broken love were now humming vibrantly, revitalized by oaths of monogamy and unwavering desire for her.

He kissed the back of her head, catching a whiff of nostalgic lavender that warmed his blood. One of his arms was draped over her waist. He moved it downwards slowly until he was palming over her womb. The implication wasn't lost on Aoi. She gasped, surprised by his actions.

'Yusaku... What are you doing?'

'I don't really know.'

'*Why* are you doing this, then?'

'Because it feels right.' he replied honestly, and he nuzzled his face into the curve of her neck. She felt him take a deep breath in, and she figured with a melting heart that he was trying to inhale her scent. She wanted to say something, but all the words bundled up in her throat, choking her with emotion. Tears stung her eyes, but they didn't fall. She was lost in

sentimentality, and she believed for the first time in a very long time that Yusaku felt a special connection to her. 'My beautiful baby...' he murmured, and it was all over after that. All the feelings she kept inside seemed to burst in that moment.

She wanted him again.

She placed a hand over Yusaku's so that they were both applying pressure on her abdomen. Despite the anxieties they both had about their current predicament, neither of them held any regret or pain. Even if they didn't know what to do, and going against all conventional ideals about young romance, the fact that they had created *something* together was a singular, ethereal concept that they both wanted to revel in for a little while. In that instance, they gave each other what neither had but deeply desired. Aoi gave Yusaku unconditional acceptance, and Yusaku gave Aoi undivided attention.

Aoi had never felt closer to him than in this moment.

'Yusaku... I love you.'

'I love you more.' he contested before kissing her shoulder. Although it was he who was trying to calm *her*, Yusaku was oddly relaxed by this whole ordeal. The sheets were fluffy and comforting, Aoi's body was warm and her voice was soothing, and the fresh scent of lavender wafted seductively in the air. Yusaku couldn't have crafted a more intoxicatingly sweet scenario in his head even if he tried. For the first time in a long while, Yusaku felt complete. It was like the scars of his trauma dissipated in this safe space, within the confines of four walls of which no darkness could seep into.

'You'll never love me as much as I love you.' Aoi teased, though the joke was fully meant. She truly believed this, and she was fine with it. She was happy to love Yusaku more intensely than he did for her. In fact, she wasn't entirely convinced that he loved her - and that was just fine. At the very least, he wasn't pushing her away. He seemed to be finally making space in his life for her and that was all the motivation she needed to pursue a lasting connection with him.

'Don't assume things, Aoi. You don't know how I feel about you.'

'Mm...'

'I don't know how to show it, but I'm in love with you.' he confessed quietly. 'It's just... There's an abyss I can't cross. I do this to myself. I can't seem to get over this feeling of living in a separate world from others. Because of this, I fail to understand other people. I don't really understand you, and so I don't know how to take care of you.'

Aoi blinked a few times in an effort to process what he was saying. It was true; Yusaku was perpetually surrounded by a ring of darkness brought about by his traumatic past. Initially, Aoi wanted to save him from that... Whatever that meant. She thought that her feelings for him held light, and that he could heal from that. It was only now that she realized how unrealistic and idealized that notion was. Was she still trying to be Blue Angel, enlightening the forsaken with *blue love*? Who was she kidding? She was just trying to force her world views onto someone who was genuinely suffering.

And now, she had effectively given him *no choice* but to involve himself with her. Because she was naive and overly romanticized their sexual endeavours, she thought that Yusaku's willingness to have unprotected sex with her meant that he loved her. Of course, the truth was that he was willing to go along with it because it felt good. Aoi wondered if maybe she wanted this to happen so that she could lock him to her. Her first reaction was to vehemently deny her own accusation, but a small part of her unraveled.

His palm, which was comfortingly nestled on top of her womb, now burnt her. He must be freaking out inside, but was keeping it together for her sake. He never cared for her, but this newfound responsibility compelled him to do so now. But Aoi didn't want to be with him this way, and she most certainly didn't want him to feel imprisoned by her.

'You don't have to take care of me.' she said eventually. 'I just want you to take care of yourself.'

'I'm fine.'

Aoi smiled to herself. 'Right...'

I don't deserve you.

'Yusaku... I'm going to take a shower. I don't feel sick anymore.'

'OK...' he kissed her cheek and untangled his arms from her body. As he sat up, she got up as well. He watched her steady herself when she stood, but he was somewhat unconvinced that she was feeling better. 'Aoi, I think it's a good idea if you start seeing a doctor.'

'Oh?' she looked back at him over her shoulder. 'Didn't you know? I have a doctor.'

Yusaku raised a brow. 'Really?'

'Mhmm... The internet.' she stuck her tongue out and went on her way to the bathroom.

When Yusaku heard the shower start, he reached for his phone and dialled Shoichi's number. 'Hey...' the young man greeted when his older friend picked up. 'I have a favour to ask. Can you drive me and Aoi to school?'

'*Huh*?' Shoichi was incredulous on the other line. 'Right now? It's almost noon! You're just asking to get scolded by your teachers...'

'Yeah. We got caught up in something.'

'I bet.' he clucked. 'That explains why your back doesn't hurt anymore. *Physical therapy*, am I right?'

The heat rushed to Yusaku's face. 'That's irrelevant.'

'Is it?'

'Can you get us to school or not?' Yusaku snipped. This conversation was embarrassing. He just wanted to get it over with already.

'Yes, I can. I'll be at your place in-'

'Not my place. Aoi's.'

'What the hell! Yusaku! Are you serious?!'

'Yes.'

'How are you still alive?! What did Zaizen Akira say?!'

'Nothing.' Yusaku cleared his throat. 'He doesn't know I'm here.'

'*Yusaku*!'

'*I know*!' was the frustrated response. 'I'll deal with that later. Right now, I need Aoi to get to school. I don't want her to get in trouble.'

'Fine. What's her address?'

'I'll text it to you.'

Yusaku hung up and did as he said he would. He then sat on Aoi's bed, waiting for her to finish up and return. When she did, she was dressed in a fresh uniform. She offered him a small smile as she walked over to her desk to pick her school bag up. 'I'm going to head to school now. Thank you for staying.'

'Don't worry about it. I called Kusanagi-san to drive you to school.'

'Oh!' Aoi's eyes widened. 'You didn't have to do that.'

'I don't want you to walk in your condition.'

'I'm pregnant, not immobile.'

'You burn up and collapse every now and again.' he pointed out. 'I don't want to exacerbate your symptoms.'

Aoi sighed. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other nervously. Yusaku was worrying about her, and she didn't like that one bit. This was why she didn't want to tell him in the first place. She didn't want to stress him out. It just felt like the only thing she ever brought Yusaku was hardships. She was starting to believe that perhaps this was a sign that they were never meant to work: she couldn't make him happy. He couldn't even depend on her. She was just a child. A stupid, naive child who wanted his attention.

'He's here.' Yusaku announced when he got a text from Shoichi. 'Let's head downstairs.'

Aoi nodded. On their way out, she made sure to reenable the robot maid. If Akira came home to find it inoperable, he would know that she had done something he wouldn't have approved of.

'Hey, you guys!' Shoichi greeted the two teenagers as they walked over to his vehicle. 'Aoi-chan! It's been a while!'

'Yes, it has.' she smiled. 'I hope you've been well.'

'I have.'

'Sit in the front.' Yusaku urged Aoi. 'You're going to be dropped off at school. I'm going to take a shower at the back and then go home to change into my uniform.'

'Oh...' she couldn't hide her disappointment. 'Are you not going to be joining me and Takeru for lunch, then?'

Yusaku's gut twisted sickeningly. Takeru. Fucking Takeru. Yusaku almost forgot about him. Takeru, his wonderful friend who had been nothing but nice to him and who also coincidentally fell for Aoi. How was he going to face him?

'Yusaku?' Aoi rubbed her lover's back. 'What's wrong? You went silent all of a sudden.'

'Nothing's wrong.' he lied. 'Say hi to Takeru for me.'

'Right.'

'And Aoi?'

'Mm?'

'I'd appreciate it if...' he trailed off. If he told Aoi to keep their pseudo-relationship (was it even a relationship?) a secret, then she would undoubtedly be upset again. But, if he didn't warn her and she ended up revealing to Takeru what they had done last night and that they had rekindled some of their lost intimacy, then Takeru would be upset.

Yusaku decided that he couldn't win or control the situation.

Fuck it. Whatever happens, happens.

'Yusaku?'

'I'd appreciate it if you took it easy today.' he finished tightly, flashing her a forced smile. 'I'll see you later.'

'Oh, Zaizen!' Takeru called out from his seat on his usual bench table when he saw the said woman approaching him. 'Where's Yusaku?'

'I don't know.' she pretended, thinking that revealing what had really happened would only raise more questions that she didn't feel like answering. Furthermore, try as she might to deny that she cared, the truth was that she didn't want Takeru to think that she was a slut. If he knew just how easily she could fall under Yusaku's spell even after he mistreated her, then even Takeru might think badly of her. She didn't want that. She appreciated Takeru as a friend and wanted him to be confident in who she

was. Hopefully, he could grow to trust her just as she trusted him, and he would learn to depend on her.

Aoi thought that that wasn't possible if she gave off the impression that she was easily manipulated.

After all, Yusaku and Takeru are best friends. They shared trauma and secrets together. They understood each other better than anyone else. Despite Takeru's assurance otherwise, Aoi was convinced that Yusaku must have told him something.

'I've been waiting for you for so long that I already finished my food.' Takeru teased. 'You don't really eat during lunch anyway, right?'

'Eh?'

'You know, there's this career-fair thing going on in the gymnasium.'

'Takeru wanted to go seek help for his dim-looking future.' Flame piped up.

'That was seriously uncalled for.' Takeru snapped back.

Aoi giggled. Takeru rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed. Why did Flame have to go and embarrass him in front of his crush?

'Let's go.' Aoi smiled.

When they arrived at the gymnasium, they were surprised to see just how many students actually turned up. Many of them seemed anxious, frantically reaching for brochures that were laid out on different tables. Almost a hundred booths seemed to be installed, showcasing companies mostly involved in software and technology. Then, there were medical-themed booths that encouraged students to consider further schooling to become doctors or nurses. A small fraction of the booths were dedicated to underlining the importance of being involved in service-sector, government jobs.

'Yusaku should've come to this.' Takeru lamented. 'I can't imagine myself doing any of this. But Yusaku... He's more reliable than a supercomputer. I bet he'd have no problem getting a job at one of these software companies.'

'I know.' Aoi agreed. 'He's so clever.'

'Yeah. I can't wait to see what he does in the future.'

Aoi's heart skipped a beat at that. The future. Yusaku's future. That could possibly involve a child now, considering that she was carrying his genetic material. This conversation was triggering an ongoing debate in her head that she tried to quell, but kept her up at night anyway. Did Yusaku even want this baby? He said he does. He acts like he does, but he may just be protecting her.

'Takeru-kun... What do you think Yusaku wants to do in the future?'

'Ha...' Takeru chuckled. 'You'd have to ask him that. I shouldn't be speaking for him.'

'Oh...' Aoi's eyes were downcast, but she quickly regained composure. Looking at her companion, she interrogated him further with determination, 'What do *you* think Yusaku should be doing?'

'I don't have a clear picture in my head. But I think whatever he'll be, he'll be great.'

Can he do that with an obligation hanging over his shoulder?

Aoi instinctively palmed her womb. She felt sick again, but this time she was sure that it wasn't from the pregnancy. Her heart dropped and she felt like her insides have been gutted out. She felt empty inside. It was so easy to hate herself nowadays.

Why did she do this? Why did she fuck him? Why did she fuck him, *unprotected*? She was screwing everything up for everyone. How long could she keep this a secret? What was Akira going to do when he found

out? Because, inevitably, *he was going to find out*. Be it tomorrow or on his death bed, she knew that she couldn't keep it from him forever.

And then there was Yusaku.

Aoi knew that she was fucking everything up in his life. He was so young and full of potential. He didn't need to deal with her antics, nor did he deserve to be saddled with a child - all because she couldn't keep her legs closed. She was the one who forced her feelings onto him, she was the one who crawled back time and time again hoping that he would love her. If she hadn't done that, then he wouldn't have this burden to carry.

He should hate her.

Of course he doesn't want this baby. He was just too nice to say anything, because no matter how cruel he had been to her, he never actually wanted to break her. But in his selfless acceptance of her stupid mistakes, she was the one breaking him apart. What was she supposed to do when she started showing? Not only would she be freaking Yusaku out, but she wouldn't be able to go to school. Why did Akira work his ass off every night, then? Why did he gave up so much if she was just going to end up a high school dropout?

She was just a child herself. How was she supposed to take care of a child? And how could she have the audacity to take Yusaku's future away from him? And to invalidate Akira's past, to discredit all the hard work he's put in for her?

'What do you want to do when you're older, Zaizen?'

Aoi thought about it. After a while, she candidly revealed, 'I have no idea.'

The hand on her womb balled up into a fist.

Thank you guys so much for your overwhelming support in this story!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you for your review!

Yujo0147, thank you for your continued support and encouraging words! Yusaku and Akira will have another confrontation in later chapters. Emma and Aoi will have more conversations like the one in this chapter, although their relationship will evolve as well. They'll both help each other discover themselves as they relate to each other in a way that men can't to women. Yes, you are absolutely correct, there will be revised moments based on the anime! Yusaku and Aoi will have different conflicts that don't have to do with mistreating each other, but about secrets unraveling. Their relationship will have ups and downs, but it will be unlike the pattern in this story. I hope that if you do read it once it's up, that you'll still find it enjoyable!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Aniki, thank you for your review and continued support! Yusaku wants to change to assist Aoi, although Aoi herself is questioning his sincerity no matter how much she wants to believe it. And yes, at this point, Yusaku would be devastated if anything happened as he's finally allowing himself to form a connection.

Guest, thank you for your review! And yes, everyone is starting to feel differently about everything going on. Thank you as well for saying that you would like to read the upcoming story! As for my deleted story, I didn't feel like I could go anywhere with it plot-wise, so I decided that it was best to discontinue it.

Guest, thank you for your review! Don't worry, their relationship will soon take a public turn! And you are right about Aoi exploring new and dangerous territory. Akira has to realize that his sister is growing up and that he can't protect her from everything, and that she will inevitably make choices that hurt her.

Guest, thank you for your review! Akira wants Emma to investigate what Aoi has been up to lately to hopefully uncover why Aoi is so standoffish. As for the AU, Yusaku and Aoi use their relationship together for different reasons. In the AU, Aoi is more connected to the Lost Incident, and her part in it will greatly affect how Yusaku feels about it.

Guest, thank you for your review! And yes they will. This story will ultimately showcase closure of their relationship.

27. The Bare Bones

Hey guys! Before you read this chapter, I want to credit two people for helping me shape it. Had it not been for their input, this chapter would have turned out drastically different and the story would have gone in another direction that I believe would have been a worse outcome.

Leechan1993 suggested that perhaps Emma could talk to Akira and/or Yusaku. By pitching this idea, they allowed me to completely revamp the entire chapter and I am more satisfied with the final product. Thank you to them for redirecting the course of the plot.

Ghostkid33 gave me the quote that Emma relays onto Yusaku in this chapter. By doing so, they gave me the opportunity to shape an interactive relationship between those two characters in this story. Thank you to them for mapping out a character relationship that I wouldn't have thought of otherwise.

Akira Zaizen's head was spinning.

He felt like he had either taken a direct hit to the skull form a baseball bat, or collided with a fast-moving truck. As he came to, his vision remained somewhat blurry. He blinked a few times to try and clear the image he was seeing, but he was shocked when he realized that he was staring at his own two feet, tied to the legs of a wooden chair that he was apparently sitting on. He tried to move, but his arms were restrained behind his back, tied to the chair. Now in full blown panic, his striking, violet eyes widened and darted around the room. Impeccably white walls surrounded him and modern furniture peppered a relatively barren living room. To his horror, he realized that he didn't recognize this place.

'What the fuck?' he blurted. 'Where am I?'

'My apartment.' a familiar, airy voice responded. Akira managed to look over his shoulder to see Emma Bessho standing right behind him. Her arms were crossed over her chest in proud triumph. Akira noted that she was

probably in the most laid-back attire he's ever seen her in; a dark shirt and shorts which were baggy and unflattering. Her long hair was tied up in a messy bun. A playful smirk graced her lips. She might as well have been the cat that caught the canary.

Was *he* the fucking canary?

'Emma, what are you doing to me?'

'Don't worry.' she waved a hand dismissively as she sauntered over to him. Akira tensed, but this didn't deter Emma whatsoever from closing the distance between them. 'You're in my care now.' she continued in a syrupy tone as she combed her fingers through his hair. He flinched at the contact, but couldn't deny that her touch was oddly calming even though *she was the one who was freaking him out in the first place*. 'I'm going to keep you here until you straighten yourself out.'

'Emma, stop. You're acting strange.'

She scoffed. 'Are you serious? Don't pin this on me! *You're* the one being such a creep!'

'What?!'

'You don't remember?'

'Remember what...?' he trailed off before realizing that he was still in the grey hoodie and jeans he wore to the café he walked into in the morning. Rarely was Akira in unprofessional, casual attire. The only reason he dressed so informally was because he didn't want to be recognized. He had just pulled an all-nighter in the office, and thus looked like a fright. He didn't have the chance to go home as he had more work to do, but he just wanted to get a cup of coffee before having to enslave himself to his company for the next twenty-four hours. But those plans were ruined now because... 'You kidnapped me.' Akira said slowly as if processing the words as he spoke. 'You took me from the café... And now I'm at your place. You actually, seriously kidnapped me.'

'I didn't kidnap you. You're hardly a child. I just...' she winced. 'I took you.'

'Emma, what is *wrong* with you?! How did you even manage that?!'

'Slipped you something in your drink, dummy!'

'And you did all this for what reason?!'

'Because you're going insane!' she rolled her eyes. 'You tried to hire me to spy on your sister's love life. You're too much... You want to know who she's seeing, who she's kissing, who's having sex with... That's so *weird*! Akira, don't you think she deserves some privacy?'

'Don't tell me what to do with Aoi!' he spat back defensively. 'You're not family! You're a nobody... What gives you the right to decide what's right or wrong for my little sister?!'

'You're right - I'm nobody to you guys. But even a nobody like myself can see that Aoi-san is growing up and needs to experience the world for herself. You might think that she's still a child, but she isn't!'

'Emma, *fuck off*!' Akira bellowed, tugging at his restraints. They wouldn't loosen, which angered him further. He had no time for this nonsense. He had to get out of here, get to work, make some money to support himself and Aoi, and then be a parent to a pseudo-daughter who hated his guts. He had responsibilities to attend to. 'Get me out of this chair! This is ridiculous!'

'Just relax.' she turned her back to him and headed to her bedroom. She needed to get changed into more appropriate clothing to step outside. Akira would be fine here... Maybe she'd give him a muzzle or something to shut him up. 'I've already called your work to say that you need a day off. You'll be fine. No one's looking for you. Besides...' she looked back at Akira and winked condescendingly. 'I'm sure Aoi-san is used to you not being home.'

'Emma!'

'Shh...' she hummed as she took a roll of duct tape from on top of her coffee table. She tore a strip off with her teeth and, despite Akira's protests, sealed his lips. 'Be a good boy.' she wagged a finger in front of his face. 'I'll be back soon.'

'What's the point of going to school?' Ai whined from the Duel Disk on Yusaku's arm. 'You have, like, *two* classes left.'

'It's better than not going at all. Now be quiet.' Yusaku hissed at his Ignis as he walked along the hallway. Once he made it to the door of the lecture room that his current class was in, he entered it quietly and made his way to the top of the classroom, where he usually sat alone. Because of his stellar grades, the teachers never called him out for being late or skipping class. So while the average student would have been distraught at the prospect of walking into the class so late in the day, Yusaku was reassured by his upper-echelon standing that this was no big deal.

He sat through his final two lectures of the day in absolute silence... Primarily because he fell asleep. But whatever. He didn't need to listen to keep up with the workload anyway. By the end of his last lesson, Yusaku was subject to Naoki's relentless song-and-dance about how awesome LINK VRAINS was. Normally, Yusaku didn't have the heart to cut Naoki short. This time was another story: Yusaku needed to find Aoi and speak to her about her condition. She was obviously having a tough pregnancy, and with such cautionary symptoms being displayed so early on, he was determined to get convince her to see a doctor.

After blowing Naoki off, Yusaku rushed out of the building. Aoi's classes must have ended for the day as well, and the Duel Club wasn't meeting today. Therefore, Aoi was probably well on her way home. His best chance of bumping into her was on his way to the school gates. He could have sent her a message, but judging by her wariness in talking about her fainting spells, he felt that she might have ignored him.

'Aoi!' he called out when he spotted her sitting by the fountain. She was staring off into space, evidently daydreaming. In fact, she was so deeply entrenched in her own thoughts that she didn't even respond to him. He approached her, and it was only when she heard his footsteps drawing closer that she looked his way.

'Yusaku.' she whispered. 'Hi.'

'Hey.' he sat beside her. 'How are you feeling?'

'Hehe... I'm fine.'

He knew she was lying, but he knew better than to challenge her - especially in public. Aoi had a bad habit of retreating into herself when confronted. The first thing he had to do to mitigate the situation was take her somewhere wherein she'd feel more comfortable. 'I'll walk you home.'

'Thanks.'

Yusaku palmed the base of his companion's spine throughout the whole stroll to the Zaizens' apartment building. He wanted to be prepared in case she fell or fainted again, although thankfully neither of those possibilities actually happened. Strangely, Aoi was quiet the entire time. She was never a talkative personality to begin with, but he felt that the silence was eery. It was tortuous being so close to her and yet also being so distant. Without her offering him any warmth, he felt worse than if he'd been alone. Even so, he wasn't going to force his desire for affection onto her. Aoi was naturally a loving girl; if she wasn't giving him attention, it was most likely because she was struggling with an internal conflict.

He could guess what it was about.

'Do you want to come upstairs?' Aoi offered with a smile when they reached her home address. 'As a thank you for walking me all the way here.'

Yusaku nodded. Aoi took his hand in hers, and while his heart fluttered a bit at the contact, he tried to calm himself down. He squeezed her hand

affectionately, hoping to communicate just how much he cared for her. Aoi noted this, and with a smile, led him past the concierge and into the elevators that would take them both to her apartment.

Once they entered her unit, the robot maid greeted them. That made Aoi a little nervous. *Shit*. She'd have to figure out how to erase the footage of her entering with Yusaku later. As of now, without further ado, she disabled the robot.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.' she replied. 'I just... I don't want anyone listening to our conversation. Even if it is just a robot.'

'I see...'

'Come on.' Aoi motioned for him to join her by the couches in front of the giant flatscreen television. 'Let's get comfortable.'

Impossible.

But they attempted to anyway as they fidgeted in their seats.

'Yusaku... We need to talk.'

'About?'

Aoi's jaw dropped disbelievingly. *Seriously*? 'About our child.'

Brilliantly vibrant emeralds widened. The fear swirling around his eyes wasn't lost on Aoi. She could tell that the reality of her pregnancy terrified him, but that he was desperately trying to fight his demons away for her sake. Perhaps he felt that if showed weakness, that she would lose faith in him and subsequently herself. Aoi thought he was being ridiculous. She *didn't* have any faith in him, and she most certainly didn't have any within her own soul. However, this was a situation that needed to be discussed. There was no other way around it. She was so confused and lost that she

still couldn't come to grips with the fact that this was actually happening to her.

'It's not a child.' Yusaku corrected through grit teeth. The venom in his tone surprised his partner. Not only was he being defensive, but he was almost... angry. At her? Maybe. But mostly at himself for letting this happen. 'It's a mass of cells that hasn't fully taken shape or form. It's a conglomeration of insensitive microbes.'

'Alright, I get it.' she snapped. 'But we still need to talk about it.'

'Aoi, there's nothing to talk about. I already told you... It's entirely up to you. I'll support you in any decision you make.'

'When you say that, you make it sound like this is all *my* fault.' she was exasperated. 'I don't have all the answers. I'm afraid. I literally have no idea what I'm doing, and you just holding my hand from the sidelines isn't actually helping me so much as it's making yourself feel better about contributing to this stupid situation!'

'I'm not-' he was ready to retort, but quickly sealed his lips. Fuck it. Who cares? He didn't have to win this one. Aoi was obviously upset, and aggravating the already tense conversation wasn't going to get either of them anywhere. 'Fine.' he conceded. 'Let's talk about it. What do you want to know?'

Aoi's gut twisted sickeningly. What if she didn't like his answer? Actually, why would she even have the right to *not* accept his perspective? Ultimately, she was going to be the one to decide what to do with her own body. He was just giving his opinion.

Right?

'Yusaku, do you want this child or not?'

It was his turn to feel like he had been punched in the stomach. There Aoi went again, calling *it* a *child*. It wasn't a child. It was a bunch of cells with

no heartbeat and no mind of its own. Currently, it was no different than an AI lesser than the Ignis.

That's what he told himself when the temptation to bond with Aoi over this potential life crept upon him.

Logically, he should be terrified of becoming a teenage father. And he was. He was beyond mortified, and he was aware that he wasn't at all well-equipped to become a successful parent. Moreover, though he loved Aoi deeply, he didn't want to commit to her in that way... He didn't want to commit to *anyone* like that. Relationships still scared him. Commitments were the stuff of nightmares. He hated being around people.

Of course, he loved her. He was *in love* with her. He was no longer pushing her away, but that didn't mean that he was confident that he could be a proper boyfriend, let alone a lifelong partner. A fragment of illogical thinking in him peddled the idea that having to parent a child with Aoi would inevitably bring them closer and that a happy ending for both of them awaited. However, the truth was that they barely got along now, and they had neither the resources or skills to raise children. He wanted to be happy with her, but he didn't want it like *this*. He wanted this eventually, but not now.

How was he supposed to tell her that?

'Yusaku...' she reached over to place her hand on his knee. Broken out of his thoughts, he looked right into her eyes, which were brimming with a million emotions he couldn't decipher. Poor Aoi. He put her in this situation.

'I...' he began. 'I just want what you want.'

'Don't do that! Don't place it all on me. I don't want this responsibility. I want you help me, *talk* to me-'

'It's your body. I can't-'

'It's *your* baby!'

Yusaku's face paled. He grit his teeth and pulled away from her sharply.

Realizing his error, he forced his features to relax and tried to embrace her apologetically.

But the impact of his reaction angered Aoi. She swatted his arms away and slid backwards, placing distance between them.

'I don't get you at all.' her voice broke and she palmed her forehead with both hands. She had a mind-splitting headache from trying to figure the impossible Yusaku out. Not only did he make her feel hopelessly in love, but he also drove her crazy with fury. Why did he palm her womb this morning, only to have his face etch in horror when she reminded him that it was him inside of her.

'Aoi-'

'I don't want to hear it!'

'Aoi, I'm sorry.' he insisted, getting on his knees in front of her and trying to look at her although her hands shielded her face. A sinking feeling filled his stomach. He didn't want to stress her out and potentially exacerbate the symptoms of her unusual pregnancy. 'I'm sorry, baby, I really am. I'm not trying to be difficult. I-'

'Just tell me, please.' she spoke in what were barely whispers and refused to look at him. 'Help me. I don't know what to do. I don't know what's right and wrong. Help me figure this out, please. I feel so *alone*. I don't know what to do.'

'Aoi.' Yusaku's tone was firm. He didn't want the heated nature of this topic to drag on for much longer. She was in pain and he was worried that physiological manifestations of her emotional turmoil would manifest again and put her in serious danger. 'I'm sorry. Tell me what you want.'

'I want to know what *you* want.' she finally dropped her hands to stare at him with red-rimmed, tired eyes. 'If you were me... Would you have it?'

Yusaku swallowed.

'A part of me doesn't want to.' Aoi revealed, though this was a calculated revelation. She hoped that by showing that she wasn't necessarily leaning towards having the baby, that Yusaku would be more comfortable telling her his true feelings about it. If he wanted it, then he'd be angry and try to convince her otherwise. But if he agreed with her supposed hesitancy... 'I'm scared.'

'Aoi... The truth is, I-'

'I knew you'd be here.' Emma teased as an exhausted-looking Yusaku exited the lobby of the Zaizens' residence, who glared at the imposing woman. 'Although I was expecting to catch you walking in with Aoi-san. I hoped that we could all have tea somewhere.' she joked. 'You know, I thought it was about time Aoi-san introduced me to her boyfriend.'

'What do you want?' Yusaku demanded. He wasn't in the mood for playful banter. In fact, he wasn't in the mood for anything other than bed. He just wanted to fall asleep and wake up tomorrow so that he could restart his life. Today was beyond tiring. His limbs felt like jelly and his heart seemed to be constantly tight, as though a snake were coiling around it.

'Aww... You don't look like you're in high spirits.'

'I'm not.'

'I wonder why.' she tapped her chin in faux ponder. 'Hmm... Leaving this building with your tail tucked between your legs... Did you maybe get into a fight with Aoi-san?'

'A *disagreement*.' Yusaku corrected, although his biting tone indicated his frustration. Was it that obvious? He liked to think of himself as the master

of all poker faces, but Aoi had a knack for getting under his skin. No one miffed him as much as she did, and he knew that she did it on purpose. Having said that, he understood that her impulsive desire to be angry with him was perhaps just a defence mechanism for what she anticipated was inevitable rejection.

'A disagreement that you lost, am I right?'

Yusaku scoffed. 'You could say that.'

'Well... I'm going to go upstairs and have a talk with her.' Emma winked. 'I've been wanting to speak to her for a while now... It's been weird, just watching you guys on the sidelines. But now, Akira's starting to freak out about you and I need Aoi-san to learn how to deal with her older brother.'

'Go ahead then.' he shrugged and began walking past his acquaintance.

'You know... You should really be careful with how you treat Aoi-san.'

Yusaku stopped in his tracks.

'She's a really sensitive girl. She has a big heart, but that heart is easily destroyed by little things you may not realize you're doing. You don't seem like a bad guy, but...' she laughed. 'From what I gather about you, you're not all kisses and cuddles.'

'I'm trying.' he replied honestly. 'I don't know how to take care of her, but I'm really trying.'

'Well, just because you try doesn't mean that you give her what she deserves. She'll love you until she realizes that she deserves better.'

Yusaku's heart sank. This woman was unknowingly tugging at all his insecurities regarding the girl he was in love with. Regardless, there was a lot of truth in what she was saying. This is exactly how he had been feeling for a while: his relationship with Aoi was doomed because he would never

be able to be the man who was worthy of calling her his. And yet, he still wanted to be with her.

At what cost?

Aoi was suffering.

'A woman's heart is sort of like a vault.' Emma warned as she walked into the lobby. 'Once you're out, you're just... *out*.'

Hey guys, thank you so much for your overwhelming support in this story! Every chapter, I'm blown away by the reception and yet am still unable to truly express just how grateful I am for all the encouragement.

My new story, *There Are No Angels Here,* is up and thank you for you the support you have given me in its first chapter! Thank you for the wonderful reception and I hope that it will be an enjoyable read!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you for your review!

Yujo0147, thank you for your kind review and continued support! I can't answer your question without spoiling the story, I'm sorry! I hope that the next few chapters makes everything clearer. Thank you as well for your review in my other story. Thanks again for your encouragement in my writing!

Guest, thank you for your review! I agree with all your observations. And thank you for your well wishing on my new story!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Aniki, thank you for your review and continued support! This story will certainly have a happy ending, although I won't reveal what that is until the very end!

Guest, thank you for your review and I hope you enjoy this update!

Guest, thank you for your review! I can't answer your questions without spoiling the story, so I hope the next few chapters will be worth the reveal! Thank you as well for saying that you love my work, what a wonderful compliment!

Guest, thank you for your review! Hope you enjoy the update!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review!

28. Corrupt

'I am sorry.' the robot-concierge said for the umpteenth time. 'There is no answer from the unit. I therefore cannot allow you to proceed upstairs.'

'That's fine.' Emma sighed. She carded her fingers through her hair in frustration. Well, she expected Aoi would put up a fight, but she didn't think that the young girl would be so adamant about not letting her into her home. Not so long ago, Aoi had begun to view Emma as a maternal figure that she could look up to. Thus, the cyber treasure hunter strongly felt that they had actually bonded and that Aoi trusted her to some degree. This cold shut-out method of pushing others away was, however, not unlike Akira's stepsister. Aoi had a bad habit of impulsively doing things on her own.

'I must ask you to leave.'

'Sure. No problem.' Emma waved goodbye as she turned her back on the robot.

On her way back to her apartment, she thought long and hard about possible reasons as to why Aoi was being distant from everyone. She was always one to keep herself at arm's length from others, but there was also an innocence about her that gave her no qualms about letting people in when the situation arose. However, ever since getting into this weird, complicated relationship with Yusaku, she almost completely retreated into herself. Emma hoped that the lovebirds would work things out, but if Aoi's self-destruction was indicative of Yusaku's effects on her, then Emma couldn't wait for those two to split up.

By the time Emma got back to her residence, the sun was setting. More than a few hours had passed since she left and she hoped that this meant that Akira had gotten some sleep. When she saw him this morning, there were dark bags under his eyes and his cheekbones were gaunt. Though her method of helping him was bordering on violence, she didn't know what else to do in such a dire situation. Akira was a good man. Emma firmly believed that. But he had a bad habit of getting carried away with all

matters concerning Aoi, forgetting that he could be of no help to anyone if he lost his head.

Emma was more than happy to be the voice of reason whenever Akira lost his mind.

'I'm home!' she declared in a singsong voice as she entered her apartment. She expected her hostage to reply with muffled irritation, but she was surprised to see that Akira had passed out in his chair. His head hung low as his body slumped. Without his menacing stature, Emma thought he looked sort of... Cute. Docile. Submissive?

Hmm.

The contract hacker tiptoed towards her captive. With a gentle hand, she ran her fingers through his hair, awakening him. Akira blinked a few times to clear his vision. He looked up at Emma, who beamed back at him with a triumphant smile. It all came rushing back to him: she kidnapped him, he missed work, and Aoi was home alone for the second night in a row.

He should be livid.

But he wasn't. Oddly, he was the most relaxed he'd been in ages.

'How are you feeling?'

After a hesitant pause, Akira replied honestly, 'Better.'

Emma smiled. 'See? You just needed some sleep.'

'Yeah... Maybe.'

'You worry too much.' she giggled, getting on her knees and propping her elbows on Akira's knees. 'The world won't go up in flames if you take a nap, you know.'

'I guess I know that now.' he cleared his throat and tugged lightly at his restraints. He glanced at Emma, who shrugged and did nothing even though

she knew that he wanted to leave. She thought that he wanted to go back home and cause mayhem for his teenage sister, but another pressing reason that Akira needed to get away from her was far from having anything to do with family.

Spending too much time around Emma in an unprofessional environment taxed his heart. It was upsetting being so close to her and remembering how they used to be when they were younger and flirtatious. That may have very well been in the past, but Akira was never a man who could let things go easily. He held grudges and try as he might to rise above it, there was a gaping hole in his chest that worsened when he was around the one who got away.

But he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of knowing that.

'I'll untie you if you promise to leave Aoi-san alone.' Emma bargained. 'Stop trying to pry into her love life. I'll take care of her from that end.'

Akira scoffed. 'You act like you've been able to be useful. But judging by the fact that you've come home rather early, Aoi didn't feel like talking to you.'

'Haha... No, she didn't.'

'Then what makes you think I'll place my confidence in you?'

'Because I'll keep trying!' Emma declared proudly. 'I'll keep asking her how she's doing, and if or when she feels like talking to me, she'll do it. And then I'll have the wonderful opportunity to be of some use to her.'

Akira nodded slowly, processing the words as his companion spoke. As mischievous as she could be at times, Emma had a surprisingly compassionate perspective on Aoi. Then again, Emma's patience could be attributed to the fact that she wasn't family, so there was no pressing concern in her mind to figure things out *right now*. Nevertheless, Akira could admit that his aggressive approach to investigating what was going on with his little sister was doing more harm than good.

Could he rely on Emma once more this time?

'Emma... I'm shocked.'

'Hmm?'

'You can be surprisingly soft at times.' he smiled, and Emma looked away to quell her fluttering heart. It had been a while since Akira looked at her that way. The gesture had a powerful effect on her, much like Akira himself did; magnetizing her back to him always, making her care more than she should, melting the protective guard she had over herself.

'I just don't want to overwhelm Aoi-san.'

'You're handling this much better than I ever could... Is it because you're a woman?'

'It's because I actually listen.' Emma stuck her tongue out playfully. 'If Aoi-san doesn't want to talk, then we won't. But if the time comes that she decides she will, then so be it. Until then, all I can do is try.'

'I see...'

'So...' Emma laughed. 'I think it's time I untied you. I know you won't be going home yet anyway... Unless home means SOL Technologies.'

With newfound faith, Akira nodded. 'Yeah. I leave it up to you, Emma.'

Aoi didn't show up at school the next morning. This was an observation that worried Yusaku, who had sent her a few messages earlier to check if she was alright. After their brief argument last night, he was worried about her. Truthfully, he was also somewhat guilty. Even he could admit that he was less than supportive of her in their last conversation, but that was only in hindsight. He didn't have the sophistication to candidly be a support system to Aoi. He didn't know how. He had never had one of his own, so he had no example to go by.

'Looks like she didn't show up.' Ai quipped from its master's Duel Disk. 'I checked the online attendance sheet for today. She was marked as absent.'

'Ah...'

'But that's expected. Your baby's stressed.'

'Shut up.' Yusaku blushed madly. 'Don't refer to her as that.'

'Why not? It's what you call her.'

'N-Not when I'm in my right mind.'

Ai rolled its eye. 'What's with humans and this nonsensical belief that there is a right and wrong mind? You have one mind. Take responsibility for what you think at all times.'

Yusaku didn't say anything back. He knew that Ai was right, but he wasn't about to give it the pleasure of admitting so. He was already stressed enough as is. It was impossible to get any sleep with his thoughts occupied by one, singular person: Aoi. How was she feeling? He upset her again - what should he do about it? How could he take care of her? Was that even possible? He kept trying and kept failing... Was this a sign that they should just call it quits?

What was she going to do about the baby?

'Don't worry.' Ai spoke again. 'You were honest with her last night. You have nothing to feel bad about. She asked you a question, and you answered it.'

'I know that, but...'

'She shouldn't ask you a question if she can't handle the answer.'

'Aoi, the truth is, if we were older, I might be over the moon to have this baby. But, as the situation stands, being a teenage father isn't exactly what I

had planned for my life. I don't want that to be the story of my adolescence.'

Aoi's anxiety was debilitating.

She was seated on a couch situated in the waiting room of a stone-grey clinic. There was no other patient around her, so the only other people were nurses and doctors breezing past her without so much as giving her a glance. Perhaps it was because it was understood in this clinic that each and every patron was undergoing their own private, emotional journey of which others were not invited to partake in. However, Aoi was the type of person who couldn't stand being alone. The icy demeanour of the staff only served to push her further into loneliness.

A steady, squeaky sound caught Aoi's attention. She tilted her head in its direction as discreetly as she could to see where it was coming from. She saw a young woman, no older than her mid-twenties, being wheeled by a nurse out of a room in a wheelchair. This stranger was wearing casual clothes, and if not for her darkening features and the occasional sob escaping her lips, it was impossible to guess that anything was wrong with her. Beside her stood a man whose expression was solemn.

At least she has someone.

But Aoi could tell that the presumed couple had destroyed more than the potential they had created together. The air between them was so thick and laden with misery that it was taking all of Aoi's self-control not to physically tear them apart. The man tried to reach for the woman's hand, only to be shrugged off. The woman then burst into tears, and the nurse behind her speedily escorted them outside of the clinic.

Aoi's heart sank.

Whether she was with Yusaku or not in the moment, what she was about to do was going to ultimately be her own journey. She would have to face all the heartbreak alone because it was her body. Nothing was going to change for Yusaku. Maybe he would have some feelings about it (she doubted it)

but his bones, muscles, and blood were still the same as yesterday. Aoi was going to lose something that was as much a part of her as her own flesh. To go ahead with the termination of her pregnancy was to willingly gouge herself.

But what was she supposed to do?

She couldn't have this baby. And no matter how much Yusaku argued (validly) that it was just a bunch of cells, Aoi strongly believed in its potential life. Strangely, she had already bonded to it even though this pregnancy was the most fucked up experience of her life. This was undoubtedly a mistake, but she no longer felt any regret about it. She had effectively accepted her situation.

Except, Yusaku hadn't.

And why should he? His life was about to implode.

He had so much potential. Anyone could see that. He had so much going on for him: he was smart (ridiculously so), level-headed, *handsome* - there was nothing he couldn't have if he set his mind to it. Aoi was about to take that all away from him. His past had already been taken by the Knights Of Hanoi. Was Aoi seriously going to take away his future as well? It was this strand of paranoid thinking that convinced Aoi to skip school today and make an emergency appointment at this abortion clinic. Because she loved him, she wanted to do what was best for him, and what *he* decided for himself.

He told her that he didn't want this baby.

Even though *she did*, she wasn't going to force her reality onto his.

Last night, when Yusaku revealed to her that he was less than ecstatic about being a teenage father, Aoi reacted impulsively. She opposed him and demanded to know why he messed around with her in the first place if he wasn't prepared to deal with the consequences. She didn't entirely mean what she was saying, but the anger she felt in the moment of what she

thought was his rejection of her yet again had to be expelled somehow. It just so happened that in the moment, she decided the best way to do so was to argue with Yusaku.

Well, the truth was more complicated than that. Because she felt rejected by him in the worst possible way, she fought him to see if he would walk away. It was a test of sorts. Not the wisest thing to do, but it was what she decided to do in that instance. Yusaku, as predicted, completely failed. He was stonefaced as she berated him for not being more accepting of their situation even though he had contributed to it. But the truth was that Aoi was just as frightened, if not more so, than Yusaku was.

If she really thought about it, she didn't want this baby any more than Yusaku did.

But she also wanted it at the same time.

She couldn't explain herself. She was a mess. That was all there was to it.

She had come to this clinic expected a clean-cut extraction. Or a pill. Or whatever. She didn't know. But she just wanted this parasite out of her body so that she could move on with her life and stop worrying about it already.

Yet, as she looked at the ominous faces of the women coming out of the rooms, she felt her heart rip in two.

I can't do it.

'There you are.' Emma greeted Aoi as the latter walked towards the Zaizens' residence. The older woman was waiting outside of the building, awaiting the return of her younger counterpart. The robot informed Emma that Aoi wasn't home, so she thought it would be best just to wait for Aoi's arrival. Of course, Emma didn't expect to wait well over sundown. 'You're home late. And you're not in your school uniform, either. Naughty girl. Skipping class just 'cause your brother didn't come home yet?'

'I'm not in the mood.' Aoi whispered, and from her tone, Emma knew that something was wrong.

'Well, I've been waiting for you for hours now. Can I come with you upstairs?'

'For what?'

'Hehe... A girl's talk!'

'You're here because you're obsessed with my family.' Aoi deadpanned, though her tensing shoulders were indicative of rising irritation. 'And you want to know what's up with me. Probably because my brother hired you.'

'I wouldn't take such a stupid job. I'm doing this because I care about you.'

Despite Aoi's penchant for pushing people away during her pregnancy, she allowed Emma into the apartment. Aoi knew that she didn't want to be alone at this time. Maybe she wouldn't reveal anything to Emma, but she could use the company. After making Emma some tea, Aoi excused herself to the shower.

'I'll be right back.' Aoi promised.

Emma smiled and nodded. Perhaps tonight, Aoi would open up. The mere fact that Emma wasn't turned away was indicative that her junior was not as guarded as previously perceived.

Which was true.

Aoi did want someone to lean on, but she desperately wanted that person to be Yusaku. But as she was slowly realizing, that wasn't fair at all to him. He was going through his own emotions about this entire stupid ordeal, and just like herself, he didn't have the answers to everything. He only had his feelings, and even that, Aoi couldn't accept even though she wanted to.

As the hot water cascaded over her body, she burned up pleasantly. She wished that she could melt into a puddle on the tiles. She didn't want to exist. She wished that she could be on a faraway plane, devoid of all thoughts and responsibilities. For weeks now, she couldn't even sleep without being plagued by nervousness and guilt. She hated the situation she put herself in, but what she hated more was that she didn't have the guts to end it.

She shouldn't want the baby.

She *doesn't* want the baby.

But she's already calling it her baby.

Aoi palmed her womb.

I wish the situation was different.

Just then, a sharp pain struck her abdomen. She hunched forwards, steadying herself on the walls amidst the steam and gasping every so often. Normally, the pain came and went. This time, it was prolonged, radiating throughout her whole body and blurring her vision.

'Emma-san!' she attempted to call out, but her voice was raspy. Her heart rate was quickening at an alarming pace and she felt a tinge of fear for her life. Never before had she felt something so disgustingly painful. She felt as if the life was being sucked right out of her, with her treacherous bones crackling underneath the weight of an invisible enemy.

'*Emma*!' Aoi called again, more urgently and strained, before pressing her forehead against the wall and screwing her eyes shut. She fumbled with the shower handle, but she only succeeded in minimizing the strength of the stream. A sob escaped her. Everything hurt.

She felt like throwing up.

Her eyelids fluttered open. She forced herself to regain some composure, albeit her failure was imminent.

Terrified, hazel orbs widened at the sight of blood staining her legs.

Thank you guy for the overwhelming support in this story! Thank you for the engagement, and for your continued encouragement not just in this story, but in others as well!

This chapter took a little longer to write because I had to research about the setting and sentiments surrounding Aoi's situation. I didn't want to write an inaccurate representation of her situation, so I thought it would be better if I took some time to read about abortion and its psychological effects in order for me to write a somewhat realistic perspective on it. Hope you guys understand and enjoyed the chapter!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you for your review and for supporting my new story!

Rose, thank you for your kind review! And thank you for saying that it is beautifully written, that is one of the best compliments!

Guest, thank you for your kind and insightful review! I'm glad you pointed out that nothing seems to be going right for the men, and that's completely intentional. Whereas in the beginning, Aoi and Emma were having difficulties connecting with the men, it is now the men who are suffering in their isolation. Ai will play more of a role in later chapters, and Kusanagi's development on how his real relationship with Yusaku plays out in the official series. Thank you for your support in my stories!

Yujo0147, thank you for your continued support and encouragement! Emma is definitely going to play a bigger role from here on out. I hope you enjoy her development!

Aniki, thank you for your continued support and encouragement! Happy fourth of July and I hope your holiday was fantastic!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review and I hope you enjoyed this update!

JustARandomGuy, thank you for your review and glad to have you reading again! I was wondering where you went!

29. The Disguises

'Is your back hurting again, Yusaku?'

The aforementioned raised a brow at the inquisitive Takeru. The pair were seated on their usual bench at lunch time, with their respective Ignises hiding in their Duel Disks. Takeru had just finished his packed meal for the day, but Yusaku wasn't even hungry. He was too exhausted to feel hunger. In fact, when the two men congregated for their break, Yusaku wasted no time in folding his hands over the table and burying his face in it, desperately trying to calm his troubled mind.

His thoughts were completely saturated with Aoi, who hadn't shown up to school for a week now. Yusaku had sent her numerous messages, and he tried to call her twice in one day: once in the morning, and another in the evening. But after a few days of receiving no response, he decided to give her some space. He effectively cut all contact with her in the hopes that she would feel more comfortable initiating a conversation herself when the time was right.

But the wait was gruelling.

Yusaku was wrought with worry, though he failed to show this explicitly. Rather, his concern manifested physiologically in his aching bones. He could barely sleep with how frigid his muscles felt. It felt like he was slowly turning to granite, weighed down by his own self-destructive guilt.

He should be with her at this very moment. And yet, here he was, pretending to be a normal high school student who wasn't in danger of becoming a father in less than a year. His rightful place was by Aoi's side, holding her hand, kissing her tears away, whispering all sorts of encouraging words that he secretly didn't believe but that she needed to hear.

So what was he doing?

'You need to see a doctor.' Takeru pressed. 'Seriously.'

'I'm fine...'

'You keep saying that, but...'

'I'm just tired.' Yusaku insisted, hoping to put an end to the topic. 'That's all.'

'If you say so. I don't believe you, but I know that you won't get it checked unless you really want to. Man...' the fire-themed duelist sighed heavily. 'What's up with my friends these days? You're in pain, and Zaizen hasn't shown up to school in ages...'

Yusaku stiffened.

'I keep sending her messages.' Takeru admitted. 'But she hasn't replied to a single one.'

'Maybe you should give her space. That could be what she wants.'

Takeru frowned. 'That might be, but that's not something I want to do. I don't want her to think for even a second that I'm not concerned about her.'

Yusaku's stomach flipped. He hadn't thought of it that way. He just hypothesized that Aoi needed some breathing time because that was what *he* would want in her situation. Or rather, it *is* what he wants. While he was most certainly concerned about his lover, he couldn't deny that not seeing here this past week gave him some relief. Aoi and his unborn child was always on his mind, but to have them out of his face gave him a comfortable distance.

But now that he thought about it, Aoi could be feeling abandoned.

Of course he hadn't abandoned her. He checked up on her nearly every day. Her silence was a cue for him to give up, wasn't it? Well, Takeru gave him another perspective on it. Perhaps this was a subconscious test from Aoi's part, and Yusaku had just failed it miserably.

How much more of this am I supposed to take? Yusaku thought bitterly to himself.

He immediately regretted it.

What was wrong with him? Why was he giving up so easily? He had just resolved to be a better partner to her, but in the end, all he did was do just a little more than the bare minimum to show an improvement in his behaviour. When it really came down to it, there was simply no space in his heart for a romantic relationship with Aoi. Try as he might to give her the love she deserves, maybe he just-

He shook his head.

So many voices in his head, pulling him from one end to the next. He loved Aoi. That couldn't be clearer in his heart. At the very least, he was emotional about her. And he wasn't emotional about anyone. She was special and he wanted to be good to her: why was it so difficult to do that?

'You should give her a call!' Takeru proposed with a wide smile, eyes bright. 'I'm sure you're the one person she wants to hear from most!'

Yusaku's gaze fell to the table in front of him. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*! Takeru should shut the fuck up. This was just driving Yusaku deeper into shame. He was the worst partner to a loving, beautiful woman, and he was a complete failure at being a compassionate human being. He already knew that.

Why didn't he have the balls to change? He thought that he wanted to for Aoi's sake. And for a while, it felt like he was trying. But now that she was pushing him away, he couldn't be fucked to chase after her more than he already had. This was exhausting. He was already freaking about her pregnancy. What more could he do except try and be there for her? Why was she rejecting him so intensely?

It's not like she was the only one suffering.

Yusaku wished that Aoi could see that.

'Hearing from you would make her day, Yusaku.'

Yusaku nodded.

Later in the evening, when he was back in his apartment, he tried calling Aoi yet again.

And once more, no answer.

'Fuck her.' Yusaku growled angrily as he threw his phone onto the bed. Normally, he wasn't the type of person to showcase his inner turmoil, but Aoi was gifted at frustrating him. She was the only soul that got under his skin, nipping at his skin, boiling his blood, tugging at his heart and ripping it to shreds in her own selfish, convoluted way.

'Hey, that's not a nice thing to say!' Ai quipped from the Duel Disk on Yusaku's desk. 'Why would you say that?!'

'Be quiet.' the student snapped back. 'There's no use explaining my feelings to you. You wouldn't understand.'

'I think anyone with even the tiniest capabilities for logical thinking would be able to come to the conclusion that Aoi-chan is frustrating you.'

'She won't talk to me.' Yusaku admitted grudgingly. 'She complains that I'm never there for her, but she won't even pick up my calls.'

'Maybe she's tired.'

'What do you mean?'

'She was waiting for you to care for so long.' Ai pondered. 'Yeah, sure, you came around. But I wonder if it's too late. From my understanding of human hearts, that organ can only take so much. What if you hurt her to the point where she doesn't want you anymore?'

'You're overthinking it.' Yusaku insisted, though a part of him fluttered nervously at hearing Ai's theory. 'We had a fight. She's punishing me.'

'That doesn't sound like something she'd do...'

'No.' he sighed heavily and rubbed his face. 'It doesn't.'

A long silence befell the room. Yusaku didn't have anything more to say, so he tried to do some school work on his tablet. He was seated on his desk, so Ai was right beside him. The Ignis didn't know how to comfort its master, so it remained quiet. That was the only way it knew how to help Yusaku: leave him alone to his thoughts. Besides, Ai didn't have any useful knowledge on how to deal with the situation. It couldn't truly understand either Yusaku or Aoi.

Human beings were so complicated.

'Oh!' Ai squeaked suddenly.

'Be quiet.' Yusaku commanded a little too harshly to hide his surprise. He was so into his assignments that Ai's voice made him jump a little.

'It's Blue Angel! She's in LINK VRAINS!'

It was impossible for Yusaku to control his excitement. The blood in his veins warmed and his skin hummed pleasantly. If Aoi was in LINK VRAINS, that meant that he could log on and see her right now. There was no way she could avoid him there. He didn't think that their relationship had gone to the point wherein she would actively avoid him if they bumped into each other. 'What is she doing in LINK VRAINS?'

'She's dueling.'

Yusaku's excitement stopped, replaced by a feeling of dread. 'What kind of duel?'

'Speed.'

Blue Angel won her latest match against a random opponent. Upon her victory, crowds of avatars cheered. Everyone in LINK VRAINS was excited to have their favourite poster girl back after a timely absence. The audience spared no hesitancy in showcasing their fondness for their idol. In response, Blue Angel raised her arms and winked at the spectators before inviting them to stay tuned for her next live match. She then flew away from the people and into the window of a hollow building.

She couldn't bear logging off now.

It wasn't enough: the loud crowd, the chanting of her title, the high of beating someone down in a duel - none of those things exhilarated her in a satisfying way anymore. She thought for sure that she would be able to escape her reality in LINK VRAINS, but the journey to do was proving to be a tough one.

What if she couldn't escape her reality?

Her heart skipped a beat.

'Blue Angel.' a familiar voice called from behind her.

Blue Angel froze. Then, she straightened her posture and looked over her shoulder. 'It's been a while, Playmaker.'

'It has been quite some time since I saw you like this.' Playmaker replied softly. He walked over to her, and her hands balled into fists. It was taking all of her willpower not to crumble right in front of him. 'What made you log on?'

'No reason. Just bored.'

'If you're so bored, you should pick up my calls.' he deadpanned. 'We could have a conversation.'

Blue Angel rolled her eyes. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared up at the ceiling. Her whole body was shaking. She gripped herself just to stay standing. She knew it. She just wasn't ready to face her pseudo lover-boyfriend-not boyfriend-classmate. 'Sorry. I've been busy.'

'I don't believe you.'

'That's too bad.'

'I know you didn't like it when I told you that I didn't want the baby.' Playmaker blurted bravely, much to Blue Angel's chagrin. She jolted and stared at him with pain etched onto her features. 'But I'll support you in whatever you decide to do. I'm trying to be there for you, but you keep pushing me away.'

'That's...'

'I'm trying to show you that I love-'

Blue Angel closed the distance between them and kissed him on the mouth.

Shocked, Playmaker did nothing as Blue Angel pushed him up against the wall. Her tongue was prodding unusually deep into his mouth; she had never done that before, nor had she been so *loud*. She was moaning and gasping with dramatic volume, as if she was putting on a show for a film that only she was aware was being caught on camera. Despite himself, Playmaker wasted almost no time in kissing her back with all the pent-up passion he had been holding in since they saw each other last time in the real world. But even then, the avatar angel treated their kiss like a game. When he tried to wrap his arms around her waist, she swatted his limbs away and purposely pressed her breasts against his chest. If he tried to cup her face, she'd pull his wrists down to her throat, indicating that she wanted to be choked - though he didn't oblige. And if his lips were gentle against hers, she'd bite down on its bottom, hard enough to draw blood if they were kissing in reality.

'Blue Angel...' he murmured in an effort to get her attention. When she quickly reclaimed his lips, he tore away from her and grabbed her by the shoulders, twirling her around so that it was now her up against the wall. He grabbed both of her wrists and pinned them over her head, effectively immobilizing her. 'Aoi!' he hissed into her ear. 'What's wrong with you?!'

Blue Angel laughed wholeheartedly: loud and innocent. Like a child who couldn't understand why tearing the wings off of an insect was a tragedy and not a humorous prank.

'Stop fucking with me.' Playmaker hissed with uncharacteristic emotion. 'What the hell is wrong with you?'

'Nothing.' she bit her lip to prevent herself from smiling wickedly. Her giggling quelled, but it was obvious that there was something going on that she found incredibly funny. 'Nothing at all.'

'Do you know how irresponsible you're being?'

'Irresponsible?'

'Speed Duels can deal damage to your real body if you're not careful.' he pressed. 'You could harm the baby.'

Her smile fell. 'What baby?'

'Aoi, stop it!'

'Let go of me!' she tried to wriggle free of his grasp, but his hold was steel-strong. 'You're wasting my time.'

'Log out.' Playmaker commanded through grit teeth. '*Now*.'

'*Fuck you*.' she spat back with hard eyes. 'Don't threaten me.'

'I'm not threatening you. I'm *telling* you.'

'You can't tell me what to do!'

'You seem to have no grasp of the situation.' Playmaker's tone was becoming more and more urgent by the second. 'You need to take care of yourself in this world, just as you do in the real world. If you don't, you could seriously endanger yourself. Consider your position a little more!'

'I'm not pregnant.' her tone was firm. 'Not anymore.'

Playmaker's jaw dropped. He tried to say something, but the words choked him, coming out in broken syllables that never formed coherent thought. He felt like an arrow had pierced right through his stomach and the blood was draining from his body. He was oddly numb. His mind couldn't even believe what she had just said. It was buzzing, as though creating white noise for itself to buy time to process what was going on.

'I lost it.' Blue Angel revealed with absolutely no emotion on her face or in her voice.

'When?' he managed. 'How? Why?'

Playmaker let go of her wrists and cupped her face. However, Blue Angel wasn't about to be comforted. She shook her head free from his touch and pushed him away with trembling arms. As a result, Playmaker took a few steps back, but he never lost his balance. He was oddly well put-together, despite the shocking revelation that should have incited an intense reaction from him whether it be great relief or unbelievable sadness.

He felt neither.

'You were right.' Blue Angel whispered. 'It wasn't a child or a baby. Not even close. It was just... a lot of blood.'

Playmaker said nothing.

'So hold me. Kiss me, *fuck* me - I don't care. Just help me feel something.' her voice remained ominously monotonous. Tears welled up in her eyes, but they wouldn't fall. 'Because I don't feel anything anymore.'

Playmaker still didn't respond. He just kept on staring at her with a million sentiments swimming around in confused emeralds. He had no idea how he himself should feel. And in fact, just like his partner, he felt absolutely nothing. It wasn't a believable experience. One day, Aoi was just a cute classmate whose secrets he knew but who he could never really approach. The next, he was messing around with her at school, until he fell in love with her and unintentionally created something with her. And just like that, it was all gone. With just three minutes of his life, in a few sentences, that chapter in his life was completely gone.

Why did he feel nothing?

Hold her? Kiss her? *Make love* to her?

Out of the question.

He couldn't even talk to her. He didn't have the words to make it better. Furthermore, he had nothing to say to her.

But he should. He should say something, to *try* to alleviate some of the despair Blue Angel must be feeling. He was useless. The only thing he had accomplished so far was apologizing to her, but he always stumbled when she needed him. This time was no different.

At the same time, he wished that she could understand that he was suffering too - that this news wasn't good for him either even though logically, he decided that they would both be better off if she wasn't pregnant.

'You're so quiet.' Blue Angel said in a shaky voice. Her monotonous mask was cracking and she knew that she was going to come undone soon.

But still, she wanted to give the man in front of her more time to step up. Maybe, if she waited another minute, he would magically make her problems go away. Because if he still showed that he cared about her and that they could move on from this, that would give her the strength to not want to disappear. Otherwise, she'd never be able to face him in the real world.

Yet, Playmaker still said nothing.

'I thought this was what you wanted.' she whispered.

'It is.' he reassured her. He just didn't think that it would hurt this badly.

She nodded. 'Alright, then... That's it. I just thought you needed to know.'

'Right. Thanks.'

Blue Angel waited a second. And then, another. And yet another. Until a full minute had passed, and there were still nothing but silence in the air.

She logged out.

Thank you guys for reading and supporting this story!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you for your review!

Arianna Weil, thank you for your review! And yes, I intend to finish all my stories!

Yujo0147, thank you for your wonderful support! Yusaku does make an effort, but what he perceives as supportive isn't what Aoi feels she needs. Aoi also doesn't recognize how badly she's hurting Yusaku by refusing his help. And thank you so much for saying that reading the chapter made your day. You saying that made my own day!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Aniki, thank you for your continued support! Aoi is not dead!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review!

30. Nosedive

Yusaku had a killer headache.

Last night, falling asleep was surprisingly easy for him. Especially when he considered that he had just learned that Aoi had a miscarriage. This revelation should have stimulated some sort of emotional reaction from him, whether it be relief or grief. In truth, he felt nothing in the moment itself or after. When Aoi logged off of LINK VRAINS, he did the same. In the real world, he took a long shower and tucked himself into bed. Slumber came easily, and it was difficult to wake up in the morning. He went through his normal motions: dressing himself in his school uniform, packing his school supplies in his bag, heading to campus... Nothing was out of the ordinary.

Except.

Yusaku wondered if he was just so jaded that his emotions were buried too deep to resurface, or if he genuinely didn't care much about his missed opportunity at becoming a young father. Somehow, he didn't buy into the latter. He loved Aoi. He constantly worried about her, and he wanted the best for her. Somewhere inside himself was an irrational wish to live happily ever after with her, even though he was convinced that they were beyond incompatible. At this point, he was sure that a lion and a fish had a better chance of being together than himself and Aoi.

The sight of Aoi losing herself as Blue Angel was imprinted on Yusaku's mind, playing in an endless loop, weighing him down by the shoulders. It was obvious she was in pain and yet, she laughed and smiled like the happiest child in the universe. However, when she revealed that she was no longer pregnant, her features fell into zombie-like bewilderment, as if she herself were learning for the first time that she had lost what was inside of her. And when she begged him to hold her and kiss her.

Yusaku shivered.

Too human. Too needlessly, *painfully* human. It made him so uncomfortable, as if a thousand bugs were crawling on his skin. It wasn't that Aoi was the problem. If anything, she was the one, singular person urging him to embrace more outward expressions of empathy. No, it was the idea of letting his emotions run amok that terrified him. Seeing Aoi crumble into dust right in front of him fortified his resolve to be steel-strong in this situation. He wasn't going to allow himself to get hurt over this. He had to fight it. He was thankful that the initial shock numbed him; it catapulted him to a faraway plane of unfeeling, and he resolved to stay there.

With the caveat that Aoi be left all alone to suffer?

Yusaku knew that he was being selfish, but he knew no other way to survive. This is how he's always been since the Lost Incident, and he wasn't about to give up a decade's worth of strength for a baby he never held. While Aoi may need his support, how was he going to effectively extend that anyway if he was in mourning? He might as well get it all together so that he could be an all around more useful person.

Even having said that, Aoi must have still mistaken his silence for distance.

Why didn't he just hold her?

'Zaizen?' Naoki Shima tilted his head quizzically. 'Oh, she didn't show up today either. Man, you keep asking about her...'

'Oh.' Yusaku acknowledged politely. He had come to Naoki's classroom to ask if Aoi made it to school today, but the answer was the usual *no*. He might be coming across as a creep to Naoki, but Yusaku didn't care. There was no other way to keep track of Aoi's attendance. He could ask Ai to check the school's online attendance sheet, but he didn't want the Ignis to lecture him about how terrible he was to Aoi again. 'I see.'

'Seriously, Fujiki. No lie, I'm getting a 'lil suspicious! You like her or something?!'

'Who knows.'

For some stupid reason, Yusaku couldn't stop thinking about Aoi after that. He never paid attention during class, but he normally dozed off. Today, however, he was wide awake. Perhaps it was because he actually manage to get a full night's rest, but he couldn't even shut his eyes. Thoughts of Aoi distracted him, pulling him into a reality that wasn't there. He could smell her lavender perfume so strongly, it was as if she was right beside him. Usually, these thoughts gave him comfort. Yet, the only thing he felt was a dull pain in his chest and a perpetual guilt that ate at him until he decided to skip class altogether and lay out on the grass on the field.

He was in a trance, staring up at a clear sky dotted with white birds flying overhead. Yusaku always admired those animals; pure, free, and ethereal in their proximity to the sun. They were everything he wanted for himself, and all that he saw in Aoi. Despite her overbearing brother, Aoi had an insatiable desire to be free of shackles.

Because of this, it was mortifying to come to the realization that his inadvertent mind games had caged her. His inability to make a decision about their relationship led to impulses that brought forth their current predicament. If he had pushed her away from the very beginning, none of this would have happened. Yet, doing so would have hurt her.

If he touches her, he hurts her. If he stays away, he hurts her.

What was he supposed to do?

Still wrestling with these thoughts by the time the bell rang to signal lunchtime, Yusaku greeted Takeru robotically when they met up on the usual bench. However, Yusaku wasn't so out of it that he couldn't spot what was out of the ordinary. Rather than be his normal, bubbly self, Takeru was focused on a stack of papers he was staring at while chewing nervously on a pen. While Yusaku appreciated takers was a human being, he couldn't really vouch for his friend's work ethic. It was out of character for Takeru to be working on homework, especially during break times.

'What are you doing?'

'Zaizen-san's homework.' Takeru mumbled. 'I went to her classroom to see if she was going to be there, but she wasn't. Her classmates told me that she hadn't been in all week and that her assignments were just piling up. She doesn't have any friends that could drop them off at her place... I don't want her to fail or whatever so I decided to do her homework myself.'

'Give me those.' Yusaku yanked the stack of papers away from his friend. 'I don't trust you with this stuff. You're going to end up getting her a C...'

'If I'm lucky.' the transfer student admitted with a groan. 'I can't even manage to do well on my own.'

'You should just focus on yourself.'

'I know that, but I'd never forgive myself if I didn't at least try to help Zaizen-san.' Takeru confessed sadly. 'By not coming to school, she's just setting herself up for a harder time... I don't know what she's going through, but the least I can do is clear the road for her for when she comes back.'

'Well... Aoi's lucky to have someone like you.' Yusaku said tightly, but honestly. He genuinely admired his comrade's initiative in caring for Aoi, but knowing that Takeru had feelings for her, Yusaku was somewhat uncomfortable allowing him to proceed with the kind gesture. So while Yusaku wanted to help Aoi retain her good grades, he a bigger reason for his intervention was to prevent Takeru from involving himself with her.

What if she falls for him?

Yusaku stiffened. Why did that idea cross his mind just now?

Was he scared?

Or *relieved*?

So what if Aoi fell in love with Takeru? She would probably be better off with him anyway. And perhaps, Takeru was the only person who could make her feel better at a time like this. But Yusaku questioned this line of thinking. Was he perhaps just afraid of admitting his fault in the situation? Was he also using the possibility of a romance between his friends as a convenient exit from Aoi? That somehow, if she was with someone else, she was going to forget about everything he put her through and they could keep on seeing each other as friends or acquaintances?

Was he *insane*?

'How's it going with her, by the way?' Takeru smiled. 'Are you guys together, or...?'

Yusaku thought about it for a moment. No, they most certainly weren't together like that. But they were committed to each other on a romantic level, in a secret agreement that couldn't even be explained in words. Yusaku dare not divulge this to Takeru, but he didn't want to lie either. Besides, Aoi wouldn't appreciate it if he kept the nature of their relationship hidden.

But was that such a bad thing?

If no one knew about what happened between them, Aoi could start over with a fresh slate. And as much as Yusaku wanted to be known as the one who had her heart, he could see no way by which he actually deserved that title. There was too much history between them: too much heartbreak and crying and painful things swirling around the atmosphere. Most of the catastrophe was, admittedly, spearheaded by himself. He wasn't about to call himself Aoi's proud lover when all he had done was hurt her.

'We're not together.' Yusaku finally said. 'It's not like that.'

'Ah.'

'You and her get along so well' as Yusaku spoke, his heart beat faster with every passing second. Whether it was from anger, guilt, or some other

emotion, he couldn't tell. But if he was indeed thinking clearly - which he most likely was - he had the common sense to know that Aoi needed someone, and it shouldn't be himself. Not unless he wanted to instigate another fight, that is. 'You must be so worried.'

'Aren't you?'

Yusaku didn't respond to that question. Instead, he proceeded with a suggestion. 'Why don't you drop these off at her place once I'm done?'

'Don't you want to do that yourself?' Takeru quirked a brow. 'Don't you want to see for yourself how she's doing?'

'I think she'd prefer seeing you over me.'

'That's not true.'

'Well, her brother's not going to want me over anyway, so for me to make a trip to their place just to be turned away is a waste of time.'

'Then fight for your right to see her.'

'I don't have any rights to her whatsoever.'

'Well...'

'When you see her, don't tell her that I did her homework, alright? Pretend that you did.'

'Yusaku, just talk to her.' Takeru sighed heavily. 'And go do that yourself. You're pushing her away. I don't get it. I know you like her, so-'

'Please. I can't see her right now.'

'Yusaku-'

'*Please.*' Yusaku repeated, more sternly this time. 'Please just do it for me. I can't face her right now.'

'I never knew you to be such a wuss.' Takeru chuckled darkly. This ruffled Yusaku's feathers - a wuss? A *wuss*? He wasn't a wuss. Was Takeru joking? He better be kidding because if Yusaku recalled correctly, it was Takeru who was afraid of ghosts and the like. Yusaku liked to think of himself as too elevated to be bothered by notions of the supernatural.

'You want to say that to my face again?' Yusaku challenged indignantly.

'Sure. I can.' lavender orbs twinkled mischievously. 'It's you who can't face people, apparently.'

Akira Zaizen was freaking out.

His stepsister had locked herself up in her room all week, not bothering to leave the apartment even at his request. Nothing could persuade her to leave the confines of their home. Akira could berate her for not attending classes, but Aoi's usual response of *I don't care* rendered his efforts futile. Thankfully, Aoi would come out of her room whenever Akira called her for breakfast and dinner. Aoi was never much of a big eater, but nowadays, her appetite seemed nonexistent. No matter how much Akira encouraged her to eat, she just would not do it. For once in his adulthood, Akira felt devoid of power. He watched uselessly as his little sister starved and suffered in silence.

Yet, in LINK VRAINS, Blue Angel was more active than ever. She was constantly interacting with her fans and setting up events that were always huge successes. While SOL Technology was enjoying the profits brought forth by their poster girl, Akira was concerned that Aoi was just burying her agony under the mask of an angel that didn't exist.

It wouldn't do anyone any good if he asked her why she was upset. Because of what they've been through in recent disagreements, Aoi wouldn't open up to him. She actively pushed him away, making it clear that her business was no one else's but her own.

Akira thought the situation couldn't get any worse.

He was wrong.

This morning, he received his weekly round of mail. As he flipped through bills and junk, he caught sight of an envelope addressed to Aoi. This was unusual. Aoi had never gotten physical mail before, least of all from the hospital - which was what this was. He examined the envelope, hoping to find more information. However, the fact of the matter was that in order to get to the bottom of this, he had to open the letter up for himself. This risked upsetting Aoi, but if he gave it to her, then she would surely hide its contents from him.

He almost wished that he never read it.

He tried to focus on work that day, but it was impossible. All he wanted to do was go back home and confront Aoi about the letter, but he knew that he needed to give himself time and space to collect his thoughts. Of course, he was self-aware. He knew that he was impulsive and emotional; two traits that Aoi unfortunately seemed to pick up from him. He was vindictive, aggressive, and manipulative. He was also explosive, especially concerning matters surrounding Aoi. However, there came rare moments in his life wherein Akira knew that he needed to place the feelings of others over his own.

This was one of the moments.

When he arrived home, he mustered up enough courage to knock on Aoi's door. Though she gave no indication that he could enter, he did so anyway. He opened the door so slowly that it creaked, and his heart sank at what was now the familiar sight of his sister curled up in a ball on her bed with her back turned to him. Immediately, his blood turned cold and debilitating anxiety coursed through him. He didn't want to have this conversation. This was a nightmare. But this was where they were now, and they needed to move forward.

'Aoi... How are you feeling?'

No response.

'You know... The mail arrived today.' he cleared his throat, but his sister remained motionless. How was he supposed to proceed with his next words? He didn't want to push her further into her depression, but it was killing him not to bring it up. Since the mail arrived this morning, he had been holding it in. So many emotions were swirling through him that he felt dizzy. He had to let it out, and he had to fix what he knew was broken - in the best way he could.

With the truth.

'There was something for you.' Akira continued softly. 'It was a hospital receipt. From the ER.'

Aoi stiffened.

'It also states the reason for the emergency appointment.'

'Why are you here?' Aoi demanded as she sat up abruptly. She faced her brother, who was standing at a reasonable distance from her. She backed up onto her headboard, as if trying to escape the creeping disappointment that inevitably seeped from her sibling's gaze. 'What do you want me to say? I make no excuses for it. It happened.'

'I just want to see how you're doing.'

'Well, I'm fine.' her voice cracked. Her hazel eyes settled angrily on Akira, not because she felt any genuine distaste for him, but because she had been feeling so alone and resentful this past week that now that she had her first instance of human contact in a while, all her feelings were coming out. Akira was just the unlucky, misplaced recipient of it all.

'You're not fine.' Akira's tone was calculatedly soft. 'You haven't been going to school. You have no appetite. You don't move from your bed for hours on end - you are *not* fine.'

'I don't care.'

'But *I* do.' Akira insisted, moving closer so that he was now kneeling at the foot of the bed. 'It wasn't your fault. Don't beat yourself up over it. I can't stand seeing you like this-'

'I'm *grieving*.'

'For what?! This is a blessing in disguise!' he blurted. Rather than realize his insensitivity, the words tumbled out of his mouth like spreading wildfire. 'What if you were still pregnant now?! How would you graduate? Get a job? You would have given up your future for a mistake-'

'It wasn't a *mistake*.' Aoi snapped as her eyes watered. 'I fell in love and did something stupid, but that doesn't mean that it was all I mistake! I hate the memories I made with Yusaku, but I cherish them too!'

'You cherish a guy who left you in your current state?!'

'What's wrong, Onii-sama?! Is that hard for you to understand? Are you going to call me crazy now? Abnormal?'

'Falling in love is normal, that's alright. But having a *baby*?' Akira shook his head. What wasn't he grasping? What wasn't Aoi seeing? Was she insane? 'Are you crazy? How were you going to feed it? Clothe it? Take care of it? Were you planning to drop out of school? A part-time job wouldn't have been good enough. What about your body? Do you know how tough pregnancy is on a woman's body? What-'

'But it's *my* body!'

'You're too young to make choices about your body!'

'Oh, so what?! You're supposed to make them for me?!' Aoi hissed. 'You don't even care to know what I want!'

'What do you want then, Aoi?! To throw away everything I've built for you?!'

'And if that is?!'

Akira opened his mouth to retort, but quickly sealed his lips. This wasn't helping. Arguing with Aoi was just blowing the entire situation up even more, and it was clear that they were both getting heated. But Akira knew that he had to be the one to step down and let Aoi run through the course of her emotions. She was the one who was in pain, not him. His pain was of a different kind.

'I don't want to fight with you.' he managed. 'I just want to know how I can help.'

'I don't need help. I need to be left alone. You don't understand me. You never will.'

Akira inhaled deeply. That cut him. To be rejected by the person he cared for most in this world was a foreign, powerful cut from a knife that was jagged and blunt. Akira could handle Aoi not listening to him. He already knew that her feistiness was just a large part of her personality. But it was this fundamental rejection of compatibility that Akira never expected.

'You're not a woman.' Aoi explained after sensing her brother's breaking heart. 'You're not in my position. And, you're just not me.'

'I want to help you.'

'You can't.'

Silence engulfed the pair. The only sound that could be heard in the room was one of her breathing in deeply, as if contemplating her next move. Like her brother was some kind of snake, and she was the hopeless frog, planning an escape or readying itself for death. Sensing this, Akira reached out for her with a gentle hand and gave her a pat on the head, hoping to encourage her to speak or open up to him.

It didn't work.

Before either of them could say anything more, their robot maid entered Aoi's room. 'Good evening.' it greeted. 'There is a visitor waiting to be granted entry into the unit.'

Akira frowned. Was it Emma? What could she want at this hour? 'Who is it?'

'Fujiki Yusaku.'

Thank you guys for supporting this story so far! I really am always overwhelmed by your engagement. Words can't fully highlight just how grateful I am for your encouragement.

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you for your review!

Aniki, thank you for your continued encouragement! Thank you as well so much for saying that you are happy reading this story. That makes me very happy!

Yujo0174, thank you for your continued encouragement! It is always helpful and I take your reactions to account in every following chapter. Thank you for taking the time to pen your thoughts!

Guest, thank you for your insightful review! I totally understand your frustrations, and those are certainly issues that I try to tackle in my storytelling. That is why I give a lot of space into writing down how the characters feel internally, as these thoughts and emotions aren't at all obvious in action alone. Thank you for saying that you love my stories, that makes my day! And no, it doesn't discourage me at all! I take it as a challenge and I hope I deliver.

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review!

31. The Value of Glass Houses

Yusaku waited by the concierge of the Zaizen's residence with a stack of papers in one hand, and a bouquet of blue roses in the other. He thought that it would be incredibly impersonal if he only came by to drop off Aoi's homework, especially since it was just a rouse anyway to get into her apartment and talk to her. When he was deciding what else he could bring her, the most logical idea he thought of was flowers. A man in his position should do that, right? But he didn't want to come across as a formality. He wanted the flowers to mean something, to intimate what he couldn't say in words.

That's why he chose blue roses.

Countless centuries of human obsession with gardening and chemistry, and yet no single person had been able to successfully create a blue rose. Because of its unattainability and humanity's unwavering infatuation with it, blue roses were a case of hope and hopelessness as symbiotic aspects of life. He hoped that Aoi could see that even in this seemingly hopeless situation, she could grasp hope itself in her own hands by her own strength - instead of being bogged down by all the terror he put her through.

Subconsciously, Yusaku traced his fingers along one of the rose's petals. Though soft and undeniably organic-feeling, the rose had no scent to it whatsoever. Perhaps a result of an extensive dye job? Its lack of aroma made it feel fake in his arms. Wasn't it fake, though? A blue rose didn't exist. It was just a fantasy, a byproduct of wishful thinking. And yet, just like Yusaku's illogical dreams of a happy ending with Aoi, the roses felt well within his reach.

But none of it was *real*.

No matter how much he tried to delude himself into believing that he held blue roses in his arms, it simply wasn't true. This notion of deception hung at the back of his head, weighing him down, torturing him with the guilt of knowing.

Whenever he seduced Aoi into submission, he knew that he was only maintaining a facade. Without the ability to fully trust people, there was no logical way they could be together. But he *tried*. His efforts were genuine. He wanted to want her without fear. Yet, it was futile. The closer he got to her, the more frightened he became of their explosive relationship. He wanted to be a supportive, loving partner to her, but by then, too much had transpired and Aoi was overly combative with him. Sure, she was hurting, but she hurt him in turn.

What was he supposed to do about his own heart? He had so much agony to deal with on his own already. His past, his ruined adolescence, his vengeance... Could he really be faulted for not wanting to add dramatic romance into the list of things he regretted?

But he *wanted* Aoi in the picture of the life he had fought so hard for. However, he had never been quite so sure if that vision was one of lovers.

Yusaku sighed heavily.

The elevator doors to the lobby suddenly pinged open, revealing Akira Zaizen. Yusaku's gaze fell to the older man, and he stood up to show respect. Although, one look at his lover's stepbrother and Yusaku that he was neck-deep in shark-infested waters. Akira looked absolutely murderous. His angular features were tranquil in their collectedness, but there was a dark gleam in those ominous, violet orbs.

When Akira finally stopped in front of his sister's lover, he inhaled deeply through his nose. His jaw tightened and his hands balled into fists at his sides. It was taking all his willpower not to scream right then and there. There were so many things he wanted to ask, to demand, to question - but he refrained from all of that. This confrontation wasn't about him. It was about Aoi and this man standing before him. If only he could find the words to start.

Luckily, Yusaku was the first to break the silence.

'Can I talk to her?' Yusaku asked softly, bravely.

Akira said nothing. He only continued staring at the student with contempt. It wasn't that he didn't want to respond, but he genuinely didn't know the answer. *Did* Aoi want to speak to him? Akira honestly couldn't make a confident guess. Even if she did, wouldn't now be the most appropriate time for Akira to set his foot down and tear these stupid children apart?

'Can I talk to *you*?' Yusaku amended, much to Akira's surprise.

'Sure. But not here.'

'Right. Um...' he handed Akira the bouquet of flowers and Aoi's finished homework. 'These aren't for you, but-'

'I'll bring them over the concierge and they'll deliver it upstairs. Just one second.' Akira turned his back on the visitor and, just as he said he would, dropped the bouquet off by the robot receptionist, who then handed it over to a smaller robot that entered the elevator. He may never admit it, but Akira was somewhat impressed that his sister's suitor brought a gift. Then again, Akira only expected it. After everything that happened, this was the very least this dumb boy could do to show some empathy.

Afterwards, Akira requested that Isomaki take the car and take himself and Yusaku to the park he often went to when he met up with Emma. He guided Yusaku to an area shrouded in trees, which would make it next to impossible for anyone to make out there faces from a distance. A brief but tempting idea flashed through Akira's mind. He could take Yusaku down here, beat him to a pulp, and no one would notice. Part of him wanted to do that, and yet another was oddly sympathetic to this young man he actually hated. Yusaku was, despite his intelligence and talents, just a teenager.

'Aoi miscarried.'

'I know.' Yusaku whispered back. He always maintained eye contact when in conversation, but this time, he averted his gaze. The action wasn't lost on Akira, who took the opportunity to bulldoze through this hole in Yusaku's otherwise perfect emotional shield.

'How do you feel about it?'

'I...'

Akira narrowed his eyes. Yusaku wasn't one to hesitate with words, nor did he seem the type to mull over his thoughts for too long when speaking. While it was true that the gifted duelist rarely made mistakes, he was at the same time very sharp. It was uncharacteristic for him to flop around like a fish out of water.

'When I first found out, there were so many emotions running through me that I couldn't really make sense of them... And while I'm upset, I'm also *relieved*.' Yusaku swallowed. 'Isn't that terrible?'

Akira exhaled slowly. 'No. I'm relieved too.' he admitted, shocking himself. If Aoi could hear him, she would surely be upset. But this was Akira's honest feeling about the whole situation, and while he didn't want to reveal too much to Yusaku about himself, he felt compelled to expose himself in this way. Perhaps it was because Akira felt terrible about the relief he felt, but to hear that Yusaku shared this sentiment somewhat eased him. 'However... Aoi isn't.'

'I care about Aoi.' Yusaku confessed, and Akira's brow twitched. 'I'm sorry that I put her in the pain that she's in now. I never want her to get hurt, but at the same time, having a baby would have just-'

'I get it.' Akira raised a hand to silence his companion. 'I know. Besides...' he raised his brows. 'It isn't your feelings that I hold you accountable for.'

'You're right. I'm sorry for everything that I've done. I'm the worst person to her.' Yusaku said without much emotion, which only served to drive Akira further into irritation. The conversation was going well so far, until Akira realized just now that he might as well have been speaking to an AI. Though Akira wasn't one to advocate for emotional outbursts, he hoped that Yusaku would appear more invested in the circumstances than what was currently being showcased.

Yusaku was saying all the right words, but where was his heart?

'Frankly, I don't see what's so great about you that my little sister fought me tooth-and-nail just to see you.' Akira scoffed. 'Even now, when all I'm expecting you from you is an ounce of empathy, but you can't even give me that. You're a sociopath.'

'I'm *not*.' Yusaku's voice raised ever so slightly, ever so *defensively*. 'I only found out about the miscarriage last night.'

'Then why aren't you broken?!' Akira hissed. His temperature was rising and if he didn't calm himself soon, he might very well implode. A prominent vein appeared on his forehead and his teeth were so tightly clenched together that any more pressure would knock them free from his gums. 'Why aren't you pissed off? Sad? Devastated? How are you so cool about everything?'

'There's no use being upset about it.'

'It's not about having any use, it's about having humanity!' Akira was exasperated. 'I don't get how it is that my sister's in pain every single day, and you're completely unscathed by all of this!'

No. I'm hurting too.

But Yusaku wasn't about to tell Akira that.

Three things. Three things to not break down.

1. Breaking down was a sign of weakness.

2. Breaking down was a waste of energy.

3. Breaking down alone in the abyss was going to drive him further into despair.

He wasn't about to join Aoi in the dark.

Yusaku swallowed the emotion building up as unsaid words in his throat. He maintained eye contact with Akira, who was desperately trying to read the young man. But Yusaku wasn't about to let anyone in on what went on inside of him. And he wasn't about to back down from his calm demeanour, from the armour he put on for the world because that armour kept him safe.

'What do you want me to do?' Yusaku eventually asked. 'Fall apart? Cry?'

'Yes!' Akira threw his arms up. '*Yes*! Anything! Just... *Anything*!'

'What good will that do?'

'It'll show me that this matters to you, that Aoi matters to you!'

Yusaku kept his lips tightly sealed. He fought not to show any sentimentality in his eyes. The last thing he needed was for Akira to hone in on his inner demons.

Fall apart and cry? He had done enough of that in the past. He vowed that nothing in this world would ever break him again. He couldn't go through another heartbreak in his life, for whatever reason. He wouldn't survive it.

Maybe he was making Aoi feel terrible by distancing himself from the situation, but how did she expect him to be involved when she had only revealed her miscarriage last night? He was already putting himself out there by reaching out to her. He never did that. Tonight was supposed to be an act of good will. Instead, she sends her guard dog of a brother to hound him down.

And lecture him about trauma and healing.

What did Akira know about any of that?

Aoi was Akira's sister, not lover. It was Yusaku who lost his own, not Akira.

What the hell did Akira know about any of this?

Yusaku wanted to scream into the void. But he feared that the second he did that, he was relinquishing all that he had accomplished. It would only prove that he was still painfully human, brittle under the weight of life. That's not what he wanted for himself. He wanted to be better than that. He *needed* to be better than that because that was the only way he could survive.

What about Aoi?

'You're heartless, Fujiki Yusaku.'

When Aoi learned that Yusaku was downstairs in the lobby, a bolt of lightning anger surged through her. She glared at her brother, telling him without words that she wasn't about to deal with it. There was a reason she wasn't going to school, and it wasn't because she was in any physical pain. Even the depression and resentment were manageable. The main reason she didn't want to go to campus was because she didn't want to bump into Yusaku.

She couldn't face him right now. Not only was she concerned that the sight of him would trigger debilitating emotions from the day of her miscarriage, but she also currently held an irrational hatred towards him that she couldn't control. When she thought of him (which was often) she felt as if she couldn't bury him far enough into the ground to satisfy herself.

But she also loved him in equal measure.

All week, Aoi had been toggling between these two ends of her emotional spectrum. The back-and-forth between love and hate was exhausting, which was the reason she was motionless on her bed most of the day. Her mind wouldn't let her rest and neither would her heart. At least she could control her body, and she decided not to strain herself as to not damage her health.

She lost a baby that she secretly wanted, and she had finally come to peace with the fact that the person she loved most would never love her back.

Considering how shitty her week was, she thought she deserved a little break.

'Excuse me, Aoi-chan.' the robot maid entered her room once more. 'There is someone awaiting entry into the apartment unit. He is waiting downstairs.'

Aoi frowned. Akira should be downstairs by now. If he hadn't met Yusaku, then he would have come back up immediately.

What happened?

'Let him up, then.' Aoi sighed, steeling herself for yet another confrontation. She thought that she made it clear by not coming downstairs that she didn't want to see Yusaku. Well, if he didn't get the message, then she would gladly scream it to his face. She was itching for an outlet for her emotions, anyway. Although, try as she might to believe that she hated him, her chest tightened at the prospect of seeing him again.

After the robot maid left her room, Aoi counted the seconds before the elevator doors to her apartment sounded off. She made her way to the living room, awaiting Yusaku's arrival. Her hands started to tremble. Her legs wobbled, and she was dizzier than when she'd been pregnant. A sharp pain stabbed her abdomen, and she palmed it.

Then, she retracted her hand quickly, as if burnt by her own skin.

What am I doing? There's nothing inside of me anymore...

The elevator doors parted.

Aoi's jaw dropped.

'O-Oh.' she was surprised. 'It's...'

'Me!' Takeru laughed uncomfortably. He rubbed the back of his neck, ashamed that Aoi seemed not too happy to see him. He thought that she

might have this reaction, but he was willing to go through the humiliation just to see her. 'How have you been?'

Aoi didn't say anything. She looked incredulously at her fellow classmate, who was absolutely bashful. That was strange. She thought that she should be the one to look sheepish, considering that she wasn't expecting anyone to visit her or care about her.

'Sorry.' he winced. 'I know that you're introverted, and that you probably wouldn't like me coming here... but I couldn't help myself. I need to know if you're alright.'

'I'm fine.' Aoi squeaked. Then, after an awkward pause, she laughed. It came from a place of embarrassment, but Takeru was relieved just to see Aoi in higher spirits. 'I'm fine, Takeru.' she giggled, and her visitor's heart fluttered when he heard her say his name without a honorific. Did this mean that she was opening up to him even more?

'I'm glad.' lavender eyes softened. 'That you seem to be doing well.'

Aoi's lips tugged at the sides, her features subconsciously settling into a serene smile. Her heart suddenly lightened, and she became acutely aware of the emotional baggage she had been carrying all week. The sensation of having unloaded her troubles was surely temporary, but she was just glad that she could breathe a little better for the time being. Leave it to Takeru to brighten her day. His genuine concern warmed her battered spirit, and she wished that she could be the same light to him as he's unknowingly been to her.

'There it is.' Takeru grinned. 'There's your smile.'

'Hehe... It's you who put it on my face.'

Takeru blushed, but before he could say anything, Aoi turned her back to him. She waved a dismissive hand as she walked back to her room, indicating that the visit was over. Strangely enough, though their

conversation was short, Takeru felt closer to Aoi. This was the first time he'd seen her in real life without her guard up.

And she was lovely.

Thank you everyone for the wonderful support on this story!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Guest, thank you so much for your kind words! Thank you especially for saying that this is your favourite story, your encouragement truly means a lot to me!

Yujo0147, thank you for your insightful review and continued support! I hope this chapter has shed some light on Yusaku's inner turmoil with expressing his emotions. This issue will become a recurring theme in this story's current arc. Akira found out through the mail that Aoi was in the ER because of a miscarriage.

Guest, thank you for your review!

Aniki, thank you so much for your continued support! I hope the events of this chapter were pleasantly unexpected.

JustARandomGuy, thank you for your incredibly kind words!

Guest, thank you for your review!

Guest, thank you for your review!

32. Be Free

When Aoi woke up in the morning, she still felt just as shitty as she did the night before. Her limbs were so heavy, they might as well have been made of lead. She could hardly lift them. Moreover, her bones creaked with every movement she made. Had she not known better, she would have brought herself to the hospital. But by now, Aoi was used to this feeling. She could recognize it: the remnants of last night's anger.

Anger had an interesting effect on her body. In the moment, adrenaline pumped through her system and she would have no control over herself. She would lash out, completely unhinged. When she found out that Yusaku was waiting in the lobby of her apartment building, the familiar fury surged through her and this cycle is exactly what she experienced. Today, she was paying for it.

Her mistake for letting Yusaku get into her head again.

Eventually, Aoi got up. She took a shower, changed into her uniform, and then made her way to the dining room for breakfast. Akira was already seated, halfway through his meal. Nowadays, he didn't wait for her to join him because she never did anyway. So when he saw her walking down the staircase, dressed in her school's attire, he dropped his bread and his jaw.

'Aoi.' he breathed, a smile beginning to form on his face. 'You're going to school?'

'Yes, Onii-sama.' she replied as she took her seat at the table. 'I'm going.'

'And you're eating.'

'Yes, Onii-sama.' she repeated as she reached over for a slice of toast. She wasn't actually hungry, but if she showed her brother she was eating, then he would be more likely to lay off her case moving forward.

'That's great.' Akira's grin grew. 'What changed?'

'Nothing. I just got tired of sulking around.'

'You weren't sulking... You were recuperating.'

'I *was* sulking.' Aoi was adamant. This quelled some of Akira's anxiety about her going back to school. Lately, Aoi had been limp and lifeless not just in the way she shut herself in her room, but in the way that she shut her emotions off from the rest of the world. The past week, not a hint of Aoi's bull-headedness remained. Her current defiance, though small, was a sign to Akira that she was genuinely getting better.

That was all he wanted.

'Whatever you think is best to do... Just do it.' Akira's tone was laced with concern and affection. 'If you think going to school is a good idea right now, then you absolutely should.'

'I just figured, you know, lots of women have miscarriages.' Aoi shrugged in an effort to look tougher than she was. 'A lot of those women were probably carrying the children of men they loved, so... If they can get over it, so can I. After all...' she cleared her throat. 'It's not like I'm in a relationship with someone I love. It's not like this affects anyone other than myself, so it's kind of my choice as to how big of a deal this is.'

'Aoi...'

'I don't want to create any more problems for myself.' she said quickly. 'I just... I want to go to school and pretend like nothing happened.'

'Nothing *did* happen.' Akira tried to be supportive. 'You're still the same as you were before. You have so much life ahead of you, you don't need to feel like you've been derailed.'

'I know. But I'm not the same.'

Akira didn't know what to say, so no words left him. He inhaled deeply. With every passing second, icy oxygen filled his lungs and encouraged his

anxiety. If there was one thing he recently learned about Aoi, it was that she was quick to shut people out if approached by insensitivity. He didn't want to find himself on the other side of the door again. He wanted to stay by Aoi's side, no matter what happened. To do that, he had to play by her rules even though Akira never played by anyone's rules. However, he decided that he could set aside his pride for his sister, who was always more like a daughter to him.

'Well...' he forced a chipper tone. 'Any plans today, besides school?'

'I'm going to the hospital after.'

'Oh?' Akira's stomach churned. 'What for?'

'I'm going on birth control.' Aoi deadpanned. Her brother's jaw hung open for the second time that morning, but Aoi was unfazed. Without averting her gaze from her step sibling, she nibbled on the corner of her toast. After a few seconds, she set it down and spoke again, 'I want to be protected this time.'

'*Oh*. Then does that mean that you and Fujiki Yusaku are...?'

'No. Just because I'm going to be taking the pill, doesn't mean that I intend to have sex all the time.' she explained in the most detached, professional manner possible. It shocked Akira just how casually she could speak about this topic, especially considering what she recently went through. He wondered if it was a sign of strength or a a warning that her soul was leaving her. 'I just want to be protected *in case* I do have sex. Who knows what I'll be doing? I want to be cautious.'

'I see...'

'Do you disapprove?'

'Not at all. I'm glad, actually.' Akira managed, though he was screaming internally. Furthermore, he knew that deep down, this was the most responsible course of action Aoi could possibly take. In a way, he was

proud of her. It was just difficult to come to grips with the fact that Aoi was growing up, and that part of that process meant evolving into a being capable of expressing sexuality. 'It's good to be prepared.'

'I think so too.'

The rest of the siblings' breakfast was spent in mostly silence. It was usually like this anyway. The important takeaway was that it was no longer awkward or tense. Akira came to the conclusion that he'd rather not fight Aoi on what were reasonable demands anyway. He had to come to terms with her evolution into a woman. She was never going to remain in his shadow forever. This was a fact that was always at the back of his head as Aoi grew up, but it was a totally different experience to actually live through it. He felt so distant from her now, and all he wanted was to be closer to her.

To do that, he had to play by her rules now.

Aoi commanded respect and *demanded* unconditional acceptance.

Akira gave her credit for her determination. In many ways, she was teaching him more about family than he thought there was to learn.

'I'm going to work now.' he declared as he made his way out the front door. 'Good luck at school.'

'Thanks, Onii-sama. Have a nice day.'

When Akira left, Aoi went back to her room to put on the jacket of her uniform and slip into her dress shoes. She reached for her school bag and its familiar weight on her shoulders was nostalgic. She may have only been absent for a week, but it felt like it had been longer. She somewhat missed attending classes. Though boring and lonely, school gave her a sense of purpose as a routine.

She then went downstairs and into the kitchen for a glass of water. From her peripheral, she caught sight of a beautifully vibrant blue mass. She turned

her head to get a better view, and realized with surprising happiness that she was looking right at a bouquet of blue roses.

A bouquet? Of blue roses?

Akira never felt the need to adorn the house with what he referred to as *unnecessary fluff*. This was precisely why Aoi felt that their home was lacklustre, though spacious and impeccably clean. Flowers, she'd often argue, added a flair of grace that came from one's personal taste. Their apartment could feel more like a home, but Akira didn't buy into her retail speak. The point was that these flowers couldn't have possibly been from Akira. Moreover, the stems were still tightly packed into the white paper of the bouquet wrapping, meaning that these were purchased recently. Akira couldn't have gotten them because he worked from home all week to stay by her side.

So, who...?

Takeru, Aoi thought as a smile formed on her lips, *The roses must be from him.*

Right beside the bouquet was a stack of papers with her name on the upper left hand side of the first page. Aoi picked it up and realized quickly that it was all the homework she hadn't done for the entire week. Strangely enough, all the work had been done.

Takeru... Why are you doing all of this for me?

'Zaizen-san!' Takeru called from behind the aforementioned girl. He spotted her climbing up the steps to the campus buildings, and decided to run up and catch up to her. At the sound of his voice, Aoi looked over her shoulder and flashed him a sweet smile. The radiant gesture zapped Takeru's heart with cupid's poison, and he stumbled on his words before he managed to speak coherently, 'Y-You... Uh... Zaizen-san!' he blushed. 'You finally came to school!'

'Yeah.' Aoi giggled before adding teasingly, 'And all my homework's done too.'

'That's great!' Takeru replied cheerfully, completely unaware that Aoi believed that he had done her homework for her. In her naivety, Aoi mistook Takeru's ignorance of her implication as playful goading. 'I'm guessing that you'll be returning to school for good?'

'Yes... I think I just needed time to myself.'

'I understand. You know, I used to be a shut-in.' Takeru laughed wholeheartedly. 'So I get the whole thing about distancing yourself from the world. Sometimes, we need to do it for our sanity.'

'Ha...' Aoi quirked a brow. 'Now you're making me want to go back into my room for another week.'

Alarmed, Takeru flailed his arms frantically. 'N-No! Are you kidding?!' he turned red in the face. Whether out of embarrassment or frustration, even he couldn't tell. Whenever he interacted with Aoi, he always felt somewhat self-conscious. He was desperate to impress her, and this same desperation fried the circuits of his mind so that he only managed to present himself as a bumbling idiot.

Luckily, Aoi found his behaviour endearing.

'Being at school is fun!' Takeru blurted. 'Don't you think so? You get to get out of your apartment and learn about things and, and-'

'And hang out with you?'

'*Yes*!'

'Aww...' she smiled prettily and caressed his arm with her fingertips. Takeru swallowed, finally realizing the suggestive nature of his resounding agreement. Though excited, a pang of guilt struck him in the chest. What about Yusaku? Wasn't he in love with Aoi? Or were they really no longer

seeing each other? Were they ever seeing each other? Did this mean that Takeru was free to pursue Aoi or was it a crime to just be talking to her right now?

A million thoughts were racing in his mind, paralyzing him. He didn't say anything or so much as move as Aoi took a step forward so that they were only a hair's width apart. Her hand was now palming the space between his shoulder and neck, right over the tense muscles that ached whenever he logged out of LINK VRAINS. She gave him a tight squeeze, and the butterflies in his stomach were beating their strong wings against his body.

'You're so sweet, Takeru.' Aoi's tone was gentle and pure, oddly adding to how irresistible she was to him. She met his eyes and stood up on her tiptoes. By now, she was fully committed to giving him a kiss. She didn't care anymore. It was what she wanted in the moment and she knew that she probably shouldn't do it because of complications with Takeru's friendship with Yusaku, but Aoi wanted to serve her own needs first. She had been put on the back burner for so long that she didn't even realize how vindictive she was being.

However, she caught sight of a disapproving teacher standing a few feet behind Takeru. She recognized this staff member. This person wasn't only an instructor, but was also Aoi's counsellor who attended to her during her punishment period.

If she was going to be caught again...

Aoi quickly moved away from Takeru.

'You smell nice.' she bluffed, hoping to change the atmosphere. 'Are you wearing cologne?'

'H-Huh?' he breathed. His heart was still pounding in his eardrums. Aoi Zaizen had just had her face inches away from his, and he was entirely unprepared for the gesture. It might have just been his imagination, but he also felt the air between them turn suggestive and tense when she leaned

into him. Was she trying to send him a signal? Or was he reading into her actions too much?

What just happened?

He thought for sure that Aoi tried to kiss him just then. It turns out that she only wanted to catch a whiff of whatever she smelled off him. Was he wearing cologne today? Of course he was, he *always* was. After he overcame his traumatic past, he made it a point to dress and act like a reincarnated version of his old self. Part of doing that was practicing impeccable grooming. Cologne was a *must*. How could she just notice it now?

But just as quickly as she'd turned his morning upside down, Aoi forced normalcy back into motion. Her features settled back into her perfect, stony, signature expression. She was determined not to let this misunderstanding (?) go sour or weird. By now, she had no intention of navigating tense situations with boys. If she was going to start anything, she wanted the experience to be liberating.

She didn't want her heart broken a second time. In that case, why not give it to someone who didn't have the capacity to hurt her? She knew Takeru fairly well, and she never felt felt the burning desire to be with him. If anything, she *already* felt close to him, close enough to be comfortable taking their relationship a step further. Although, she wasn't about to cry if he rejected her.

She didn't like him *like that*.

But she appreciated him.

At any rate, she didn't care anymore. Ever since her miscarriage, it was difficult to feel *anything*. Try as she might to deny it, she was attached to the unborn, arguably inanimate mass of cells (as Yusaku would put it) that had taken refuge inside of her. Or maybe, she was seduced by the secret dream she held in her heart, of giving birth to what could love her purely. Because, Aoi desired that kind of love that was unconditional. She knew

her brother loved her, but Akira also imprisoned her with what he perceived to be care. If Yusaku ever loved her, it was toxic and dangerous.

Aoi wanted to be loved purely.

Where did this wish come from? She couldn't say. She felt that it started after her parents had passed away. The weight of the sudden loss was too much for her to bear. And though Akira stood by her side, she missed her mother's warmth and her stepfather's smile. Because when they looked at her or held her, she knew that they saw her for who she really was - and they didn't care. They loved her anyway.

Despite all of Yusaku's flaws, she loved him anyway.

Aoi teared up unexpectedly. How stupid. What was she doing again, thinking about that stupid guy? It wouldn't bring her any good to devote more time to thoughts of the impossible. She was already too tired to even want to be friends with him. He was exhausting, brutally so.

When she only cared for him, why did he burn her?

'Hehe... I should get going.' Aoi turned on her heel and waved back at Takeru. 'I'll see you later. I have your number, right?'

Yusaku skipped second period.

He was too unfocused to benefit from any class time anyway. He hardly caught a wink of sleep last night either. His conversation with Akira played in an endless loop in his head, taunting him with how inhumane and morally dubious he was. Despite his insistence that he needed no warmth from others, Yusaku at the very least didn't want to come across as heartless.

Heartless.

That was what Akira called him.

Yusaku vehemently denied this accusation in his head. He wasn't *heartless*. He had feelings. He was capable of happiness just as much as he was of pain. It just so happened that his life had dealt him all the cards that haunted him in his nightmares. And so, if he was unwilling to trust people or give into the promise of happy endings, it was all because cautiousness is a learned behaviour for him; one that defends against him a losing hand. However, he could only hold a certain number of cards. What if there was no longer space for someone like Aoi?

Was he truly heartless?

'Psst.' Ai whispered from the Duel Disk. 'Look to your left.'

Yusaku did as he was told, and nearly tripped on nothing. Just a few feet away from him, sitting on the fountain and staring up at the sky, was Aoi. This was Yusaku's first time seeing her in person after learning about her miscarriage. He didn't know what to expect, but he certainly didn't think that she would look... *fine*.

She looked fine. Totally normal. Like nothing had happened.

But Yusaku was astute to the fact that just because he couldn't see physical signs of distress, didn't mean that she wasn't *boiling* inside. Even so, he found her beautiful. In the way that she held her head high and how her posture never once gave out, he found her hauntingly beautiful. Though arguably not fully mature in many ways, Aoi carried herself with a mystique. In her childish nature, there was an aura of mystery, of something unknown. Aoi was chasing happiness but she herself didn't know what the meant. Perhaps it was this endless desire to satiate an unknown emptiness that made her perfectly human, and her ideals unfathomable.

'Hey...' Yusaku spoke without thinking. Aoi's head snapped to him, and her eyes widened to the size of saucers. She visibly swallowed a lump at her throat. Yusaku knew that this wasn't going to be an easy conversation for either of them, but he wouldn't forgive himself if he didn't confront her now. 'How are you?'

Aoi smiled politely. She tucked a lock of hair behind an ear and cooly replied, 'Don't worry about me. I'm fine, Fujiki-kun.'

Yusaku recoiled slightly. *Fujiki-kun*? Since when were they back to using honorifics when referring to each other? If Aoi was using subtle verbal warfare as a method of getting under his skin, it was working. Though he'd never outwardly admit it, the clear distance Aoi was placing between them stung. He felt the pain in his chest as sharp and distinct, rippling to his limbs and striking him with harsh heat. He felt like an ocean on fire.

'You *never* skip class.'

'There's a first time for everything.' her smile tightened. 'No big deal.'

'You don't have to pretend to be strong, you know.' he said softly. 'If you need me-'

'I *don't* need you at all.'

Yusaku's chest tightened, but he powered through. 'I know that. I'm just trying to-'

'Well, *don't*.'

Now she had done it. The intense rejection struck Yusaku with the pain of a thousand lightning bolts. He scoffed, shook his head, and bit out, 'Don't do that.'

'Do what?'

'*That*.' he grit his teeth. 'You're shutting me out, purposely enforcing distance between us.'

'There's distance between us because *you* put it there.' she stood up and positioned herself dangerously close to him - so close, that she could smell his sandalwood-scented skin and feel the heat radiating from his body. The heat that used to calm her, the same heat that she desired so strongly and

pitifully, now posed as a mocking challenge to her, daring her to come closer so she could get caught in the flames yet again. 'What's wrong? I'm giving you what you want.'

'I don't want you to push me away.' he snapped. 'You didn't even tell me about what happened to you until recently.' his tone turned accusatory, and he no longer hid his emotions very well. He was now visibly angry, his entire body bow-taut with furious passion. 'You didn't give me a chance to be there for you. How could you be pinning this on me now, when I didn't know what was going on?'

'You had many chances before my most recent fuckup.' Aoi's gaze was hard. 'From the very beginning, all you ever did was tell me that I wasn't good enough and that you didn't want me.'

'I just said those things. I didn't mean any of it. I was scared-' he insisted, reaching for her. She pulled away sharply.

'Exactly, *you said* all of that!' her voice raised and cracked. 'You told me that you didn't think that I was pretty, and that you won't cherish me-'

'I didn't mean any of it, I already told you! Why does any of it matter now?!'

'Because I *wanted* you to think that I was pretty!' she admitted sadly. A few tears escaped her and she quickly wiped them away, but pain was powerfully present in the words that left her. 'I wanted you to cherish me, and want me, and *love* me! And I was so scared when I was pregnant, but I was also so insanely happy! Because maybe, if we shared something physical together, something *real* and *undeniable*, that you would love me. But I was an idiot, thinking that I had to fix you, thinking that I could force you to love me, when all this time, *I* was the one who was wrong! *I* couldn't move on from you! *I* forced my feelings onto you!' she inhaled sharply and tried to collect herself. The tears were coming in torrents now and her heart was beating so fast that her breathing had turned ragged. 'I just wish that I listened to you the first time when you told me to get lost. I wish I never experienced this heartbreak. I wish I could sleep well at night. I wish my body...' she choked. 'I wish my body was still pure.'

Yusaku didn't say anything. Her words were heavy, like oversaturated clouds just begging to rain down on an unsuspecting city. Yet again, he didn't know how to approach the situation. He tried to think through the circumstances logically, but his heart was weighing down on him, making it impossible to process his thoughts clearly.

He wanted to touch her. Pull her into a hug and then kiss her. Then take her to bed and make love to her, and whisper dreamy spells into her ear, and then wake up in the morning with all their heartache having dissipating into thin air. He'd see her smile again, and he'd burst with happiness because he was the reason for it.

But that wasn't life. Their issues weren't going to magically disappear. All the pain they inflicted on each other was going to catch up to them, and already had, culminating in this one disastrous moment of bleeding hearts.

He was heartless, but he could still bleed.

'Do you still love me, Aoi?' he begged more than he asked.

'I *don't* love you.' she answered honestly. 'How could I? I don't even know you. You won't let me in. You shut me out and stomp all over my feelings.' she breathed, finally regaining her composure. 'And now, I just hate you. Even though you don't deserve it, I hate you.' she exhaled slowly, oddly relieved that she had confessed to her pain. 'I can't get over everything that happened.'

'I see... Well then, thank you for...' he swallowed, blinking a few times to clear his head from the rising emotion inside him. Aoi had utterly destroyed him, but he didnt feel it yet. He was just numb. Breaking, but numb. He never knew that speaking could be so difficult. He couldn't even find words within his racing mind and heart, the latter beating so fast that he thought it might give out and bleed itself empty.

'For...?

'For loving me. Thank you for loving me.' he finished. He felt something inside of him shatter just then, but he tried not to give into the feeling of being broken. Not in front of Aoi, who had been through so much without him because he made her feel unwanted and unloved. At the very least, he didn't want her to see just how vulnerable he was. Though it was wishful thinking, he wanted to give her the confidence that she could rely on him at times to remain composed.

'Thank you for trying to love me.' Aoi whispered as she took another step forward. She placed both her hands on Yusaku's shoulders and tiptoed so that she could give him a kiss on the cheek. The ghost of her lips lingered on his skin even after she pulled away and turned her back to him.

And Yusaku knew that even he tried reaching out for her, she was already out of his reach.

Thank you guys so much for supporting this story! My apologies that this chapter took longer than usual to upload, but I found it challenging to get into the heads of the characters for this sequence of events. I tried to make it so that it wasn't exhausting, but remained an insightful read. Not quite sure how I feel about how it turned out, but I hope to read your reviews about it! I strive to improve so any critical comments are totally welcome!

Yujo0147, thank you for your continued support! I tried to balance more emotion into Yusaku's thoughts and speech this chapter. Please let me know what you think of it! Yusaku is a challenging character to write, but I am determined to crack a method of portraying him as relatable and humane without referencing his trauma directly.

Aniki, thank you for your continued support! I tried to make Yusaku's thoughts clearer this chapter, I hope to know what you think of it! Takeru cares for Aoi in addition to having an innocent, boyish crush on her. He cares for Aoi somewhat deeply, but he is attracted to her on a superficial level. My hope was for Takeru's character to contrast

Yusaku in this story, who is undecipherable in whether or not he cares for Aoi even though he is deeply attracted to her.

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33. Habeas Corpus

Yusaku was heartbroken.

He didn't think that he could ever experience such profound loss, but Aoi's absence in his life rendered him strangely empty. After his confrontation with Aoi, he went back to class and spaced out for the remainder of his lectures. Then, lunch with Takeru was a bore. He was hoping that Takeru's vibrant personality could provide a distraction, but the silver-haired student was in a strange mood. For the entire hour, Takeru was deep in thought about a concern that he dared not share with Yusaku, who didn't think much of it. Knowing Takeru, it was probably a test he didn't do too well on or it was another episode of him freaking out about his future.

After all, there was no reason to suspect that Takeru was thinking about Aoi.

When Yusaku went home in the evening, he took a long, hot shower. The muscles on his back were taut and aching. Usually, the warm water cascading over his shoulders would ease his pent up tension, but tonight it only succeeded in nearly scalding his skin. Frustrated, Yusaku shut the shower off and got dressed in his pyjamas before heading to bed. He was exhausted: physically, mentally, and emotionally. He liked to think that he wasn't affected by sentimentality, but being rejected by Aoi was unexpectedly painful.

This time, Aoi wasn't going to come back.

That fact bothered him. Even behind closed lids, he could clearly see her back turned towards him, walking away as the ghost of her lips lingered on his cheek. *Thank you for trying to love me.* That was what she had said. Her words cut him deeply for he knew just how painful it must have been for her, pining over someone that lacked the capacity to truly love her back. Even though Yusaku wanted to believe that he genuinely loved her, he knew that he was never going to let his guard down for anyone. His protective coating was precisely what kept him upright all these years: build an

impenetrable fortress so that no one could hurt him. He liked this fortress. It kept him safe and sane. In this life, he only needed himself.

Right?

He rolled around in bed, as if trying to shake off his racing thoughts. His erratic behaviour was observed by his Ignis.

'You got a case of the blues?' Ai teased, although it was secretly worried about its master. 'Or is it blue balls?'

'Be quiet.'

'Aoi-chan hasn't been here in a while... Are you missing her?'

Yusaku stiffened.

'Maybe you should give her a call?'

'Ai... Please stop talking.'

The Ignis obeyed. Just then, Yusaku sounded very unlike himself: unsure and lacking confidence. *Please* stop talking? Yusaku commanded, never requested. Because of this out-of-character blip, Ai decided that it was best to leave Yusaku alone to his thoughts. There were answers Yusaku sought that no one but himself could provide. Even so, he couldn't find it in himself to be completely honest. Why was he mourning the loss of a pseudo relationship that he allegedly never wanted anyway? Was he maybe just guilty that he wasn't around to hold her hand throughout her tragic pregnancy?

No; it was way more than that. He was in love with Aoi in his own way. But it was exhausting trying to be the man that she needed not just for himself but for her as well. He wanted to chase after her, but it was time to be respectful of her wishes. Yusaku lived in the abyss - he shouldn't drag Aoi into the darkness in which he couldn't escape.

She should be where there was light.

If that meant that she had to be without him, then he was fine with that too. He could never make up for what he had done to her, what he put her through. She had sacrificed so much for him, and continued to love him deeply, after he treated her like a cheap whore he hadn't even paid for. So from now on, Yusaku decided that he was going to ensure that the path that lay ahead of Aoi was brimming with light. That even if he had to lose an arm or a leg or all of himself, Aoi would never again be shrouded in the darkness that he had dragged her into.

Because he loved her, in his own convoluted way.

Aoi had a bad habit of laying her hand atop her womb as she lay in bed.

When she found out that she was pregnant, this gesture brought her great comfort. Now, whenever she caught herself doing it, her heart would drop painfully and she'd have to fight the urge to sob into her pillow. Then she'd palm her breast pocket, tempted to pluck her phone out and call Yusaku. Not that he would care or offer anything therapeutic, but just the fact that he would give her attention soothed her. This desire to be given affection by someone she loved and hated in equal measure was something Aoi struggled without, but never gave into.

She was better than that now.

In the end, she managed to fall asleep. She woke up in the morning, weary from her battered soul but ready nonetheless to tackle her day. After getting ready for school, she dragged her feet down the staircase to join her brother for breakfast.

'Good morning, Onii-sama.' she greeted as she took her seat across from him.

'Good morning.' Akira returned, flashing her a smile that disappeared as soon as he saw her face. Her cheekbones were gaunt and her skin dull; signs

that she didn't have a good night's rest. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fine.'

'Really?' he pressed.

'Yes.' Aoi maintained, strategically cutting into the sausages on her plate. If she forced herself to eat, then her brother wouldn't be so overbearing. 'I'm doing well.' she bite into a forkful of food and raised her brows at him as if to say, *See? All good!*

But Akira wasn't buying it. However, he knew that smothering Aoi with concern was something that she didn't want. At any rate, it was expected that she would hit some bumps along her road to recovery. If he was going to question her and let her know that he was worried, she was just going to be pressured into hiding from him again. It was better for both of them if Akira just stayed silent on the sidelines. Besides, he would know if his intervention was necessary. But for now, Aoi was holding up on her own pretty well.

Akira would let it slide... For now.

'I'm going to work.' he announced after they were both done with their meals.

'Have a nice day, Onii-sama.'

'You too.'

Yusaku's backache returned with a vengeance.

By now, the spasms were so painful that Yusaku would have rather been run over by a truck. At least the impact would knock him out, instead of him having to be tortured by random bursts of excruciating pain every so often. He was starting to feel like an old man with a breaking spine. He knew it

was all because of *freaking Aoi*, but it was no use crying over missed happy endings. Surely, the pain would pass and so would his feelings for her.

He would be fine.

He was always fine.

'Fucking hell.' Yusaku cursed under his breath as he took his first step up the stairs to his classroom. It felt like his legs were about to give out from his fragile his back felt. For the first time in his life, Yusaku had to hold onto the railings for support. Other students who were passing by stared at Yusaku quizzically. They were wondering why the tall, mysterious classmate who sat at the back was suddenly floundering to get up the stairs. Did he have an injury? Should they help him? 'No.' Yusaku protested when another student came by and offered their hand.

'Wow, Playmaker-sama.' Ai quipped. 'You should hit the gym... Or give Aoi-chan a call.'

'Shut. *Up*.'

After what seemed like a century, Yusaku finally made it to the third floor of the building. He sighed. What a relief. He honestly thought he would never make it. Each step up led to a sharp sting at the base of his spine. But now he was here, and it was just a good minute of walking before he could take a seat.

As he turned the corner, he bumped into an unsuspecting Aoi Zaizen.

The two stopped abruptly as soon as they saw each other, but no amount of self-control could prevent either of the from dropping their jaws.

Aoi's heart, too, dropped.

It was painful seeing Yusaku again. Especially when he looked so good in his uniform. He stood tall and proud, but never arrogant. His shoulders were broad and his eyes were icily mysterious: though there was no warmth

reflected in endless emerald, Aoi found Yusaku's unreadable eyes to be alluringly inviting. He was terrifyingly stone-cold, but he was undeniably the most handsome man Aoi had ever seen.

But *still*.

Aoi remembered how he used her, threw her around like a rag doll, and left her in the end to deal with the consequences herself. She remembered how he had forever changed her body and how he made a show out of her feelings for him. And suddenly, she hated him, wanting nothing more but to push him out of her sight.

'Good morning, Fujiki-kun.' Aoi greeted politely.

'Good morning.' he returned softly. Yusaku wondered briefly if he should say anything more, but Aoi walked right past him. There was no longer a chance to pursue a discussion with her. Besides, it was evident that she wasn't interested.

Strangely enough, as soon as she left him, Aoi's soul was heavy. A big part of her wanted to go back and hug him, and beg to at least be friends, but she knew it was just her sentimentality trying to get the better of her yet again. She vowed that she was going to be different this time around so that she would never again be caught in a situation that she would later regret. She was going to be strong for herself. No more settling for less than she deserved.

Although she didn't think too highly of herself, she at the very least believed that she didn't deserve to pine over someone who had made a complete mockery out of her love.

Lunch with Takeru was supposed to be fun.

But Yusaku's best friend was as silent as a forest in the dead of night. Takeru was nervous; annoyingly so. He was seated on the usual bench across from Yusaku, incessantly poking at his bento with his chopsticks and

avoiding eye contact with his companion. Flame was chattering with Ai in the background, but neither Ignis wanted to address the awkward tension between their masters. Both AIs knew what was bothering Takeru, as Flame had sent Ai a secret message not too long ago. Because of the sensitive nature of the secret, the Ignises decided that the humans were best left to their own devices on this one.

Ah, romance. What a complicated, messy phenomenon.

'Did you fail an exam?' Yusaku suddenly demanded, startling Takeru. The latter dropped his chopsticks and gaped at his friend, whose stoic expression was more intimidating than normal. A green gaze was hellbent on reading Takeru, as if to gouge out the truth out.

'No...' the fire-themed duelist swallowed. 'M-My grades are fine...'

'Are you sick?'

'No...'

'Broke?'

'No...'

'Screwing my ex?'

'*No*!' Takeru bellowed, his eyes screwing shut and his cheeks blushing an embarrassing tomato-red. '*Damn*! What's wrong with you?!'

'You've been acting odd since yesterday.' Yusaku shrugged. 'I figured there was a reason for it. Is it so wrong to try and guess what that reason may be?'

'But how did you jump from me failing an exam to me having s-s-s-'

'Sex with Aoi?'

'Don't say it!' Takeru covered his face with his hands to hide his flushed visage. 'You're so vulgar! So inappropriate!'

'If you like her so much, just ask her out.'

'W-What?!' Takeru's hands dropped. Almost-frightened eyes flew to his companion. 'Are you insane?! You guys had a thing! I'm not going to get into it with a girl you have feelings for...'

'*Had*.' Yusaku waved a dismissive hand. 'And besides... She and I were never really together. It wouldn't bother me in the slightest if you were to have a real relationship with her, that somehow worked and ended in you two living together as an inseparable pair.'

'You're going too far!' Takeru contested. 'L-Living together?! I barely know her!'

'You know what I mean.'

'She's still... I mean, you were with her! Why would I-'

'Because you like her.' Yusaku sighed. 'And I'm sure she'd like you too, in that way. When we were all hanging out, you got along with her really well. There was chemistry... Which looked like strong grounds to attempt to build a romantic relationship on top of.'

'Yusaku, what are you talking about? Seriously... Why are you trying to get me to ask Zaizen-san out? It's kind of weird...'

'It's not weird. You wanted to ask her out before, remember? I'm just being supportive of you.'

'But why are you so cool about all of this?' Takeru wondered. 'If I were you, I'd be really pissed.'

'Like I said, I just want you guys to work out.'

'I know, but... Why? Don't you love her?'

Yusaku avoided directly answering the question. 'I have no interest in pursuing a relationship with her. I just want you and her to be happy... It just

happens that you like her and she wants a relationship. You're a nice guy, she's a nice girl. Logically, it looks like a good fit.'

'But-'

'You have my blessing. You should go for her.'

'Yusaku-'

'You asked for it a long time ago.' Yusaku snapped. 'I'm finally giving it to you. I know you like her. She's...' he scoffed. 'She's perfect. I get it. Just...'

Takeru sighed slowly. 'What?'

'Just don't...' Yusaku inhaled deeply. 'Just don't tell me what goes on with you guys. I don't need to know about that.'

For the longest time, Takeru didn't say anything. Lavender settled on Playmaker's true form: a surprisingly vulnerable, human teenager wrestling with confusing emotions. Yusaku met Takeru's store, but the former was yet again completely unreadable. The only clue Takeru had of Yusaku's inner thoughts were his hands that were balled into fists, trembling slightly from what may have been anger but was certainly restraint. Yusaku wanted to mean everything he was saying, but his resolve was wavering. Could he really commit to giving Aoi up?

Yes.

Because Yusaku had already decided that he wanted to light Aoi's path. He was the darkness. He should stay far, far away from her. But Takeru - Takeru was good. He was nice, kind, *normal*. He was a healthy human being who had successfully overcome his personal trauma and was able to connect with other people. He was miles ahead of Yusaku, who still couldn't trust anyone other than himself.

That's why it was better if Aoi fell in love with someone like Takeru.

And that way, she could be loved in the way that she deserved.

Purely.

Healthily.

Wonderfully.

'You don't mean it.' Takeru whispered. 'You love her still.'

'Not enough to change for her.' Yusaku admitted. 'The kindest thing I can do is to give her up. I see how you look at her. You're falling for her-'

'I wouldn't betray you.'

'It's not a betrayal. You'd be doing me a favour.' Yusaku explained. 'Take care of her. Love her. Give her everything that I can't.'

'Why? Why would you be fine with all of that?'

'Because she deserves *you*.'

Thanks to everyone who has been supporting this story! Sorry that it took a while to upload this. I've been really exhausted as of late, and I'm waiting on some character development from the actual VRAINS series. Sadly, the new round of episode previews doesn't imply that Aoi will show up anytime soon, let alone interact with Yusaku or Takeru. I've therefore decided to write this chapter anyway. I hope to read your thoughts on it!

To all the Guests who review, thank you for your support!

Mikol, thank you for your review although I hope to gear the story towards something more heartwarming soon!

Yujo0147 , thank you for your continued support! Yes, Aoi is through trying to make it work with Yusaku. She is now trying to become a

better person for herself.

Aniki, thank you for your continued support! Funnily enough, I actually thought about ending this story last chapter. But, I'm a sucker for happy endings and so I want to leave this story on a happier note.

34. More Decisions

Receiving Yusaku's blessing didn't mean that Takeru was confident enough to just shoot Aoi Zaizen a message. If anything, Yusaku's sudden involvement in his love life made Takeru's stomach turn. Romance was supposed to be fun, right? Well, Takeru just felt awkward and pressured. Yes, he liked Aoi. Yes, he would like to date her. But that didn't mean that he had the balls to just ask her out, especially considering that she used to mess around with his best friend. The prospect of being involved with Yusauku's pseudo ex was messy... Then again, this was Yusaku - maybe he really didn't give a damn.

Which was sad.

But.

Takeru knew Yusaku better than that. If Yusaku really didn't care, then he wouldn't be involved whatsoever. This meant that he would neither be pulling or pushing Takeru against or towards Aoi. However, because Yusaku was so insistent that Takeru pursue Aoi, it was only natural to conclude that Yusaku had more investment in the outcome of their friend group dynamic than he liked to let on. Therefore, there was no way Takeru could actually have it in himself to woo Aoi. Not when he had the feeling that Yusaku was still into her.

'You protect the feelings of others over your own, and that's admirable... Though for once, it would be nice if you prioritized your own happiness.' Flame sighed from its Duel Disk sitting atop Takeru's desk. The Ignis-duelist pair were currently in the human's room as Takeru got dressed for school.

'You know, it wouldn't exactly make me happy if I got between Yusaku and Zaizen-san.' Takeru explained. 'If there's still something between them... Then I'd want that fire to keep burning.'

'But the Dark Ignis' partner has already told you that he has no love for that woman.'

'Just because there isn't love, doesn't mean that there isn't desire.' Takeru snipped, as if his argument should have been a painfully obvious fact. Then again, Ignis weren't astute to the rationale behind human emotions... Still, Takeru would have liked it if he didn't have to explain himself. 'Besides... Desire is much more powerful, destructive, and unpredictable than love.'

'Ah... I see.' Flame shook his head knowingly. 'So you're backing off because you're afraid of Yusaku's wrath...'

'That's not it! I just don't want to hurt him... Or Zaizen-san, especially if she's still in love with him.'

'I doubt she's in love with him. Didn't she try to kiss you the other day?'

'T-That's...' Takeru trailed off as he blushed an embarrassingly bright shade of red. She *did*. How could he forget? He had thought about that moment so many times in his head, toggling between regret that he hadn't closed in on her lips and relief that they hadn't *actually* kissed. Yet he still couldn't tame his rampant imagination carrying itself over the most inconceivable *what ifs*.

What if he had gotten to Aoi before Yusaku did?

Would it have been him who ended up dating Aoi?

Would Aoi have fallen in love with him instead?

I'm terrible, Takeru thought miserably, *I'm the absolute worst.*

At school the next day, Yusaku waited at the usual bench to meet with Takeru for lunch. Knowing that Takeru was going to be tardy as always, Yusaku passed the time by doing some work on his school-issued tablet - a challenging feat, considering he wasn't feeling his best. His back was aching and he was perpetually tired despite managing to get an adequate amount of sleep. He thought he was doing a good job of dealing with the aftermath of his fallout with Aoi. In fact, it appeared that he had gone right

back to his regular routine devoid of romance. Yet somehow, his body refused to heal.

In time, it would.

Yusaku believed that there was nothing time couldn't heal.

'Takeru-chan is later than usual today.' Ai grumbled. 'And that's saying something. Don't you think so, Playmaker-sama?'

'He might be busy.'

'Yeah... Busy with Aoi-chan, that is.'

Yusaku involuntarily stiffened.

'Do you care, Yusaku?'

He didn't respond.

'Maybe Takeru-chan took her on a private lunch date.' Ai's teasing was relentless. 'Or maybe he took her home-'

'Be quiet.'

'*Oh*?' ominous, yellow spheres narrowed. 'Did I hit a sore spot?'

'No.' Yusaku grit his teeth. 'Your voice is just grating. Like hearing nails scratch a chalkboard.'

'Ah... Does *this* voice sound better then? Fujiki Yusaku-kun?' Ai pressed in an almost perfect replication of Aoi Zaizen's voice. At the sound of the familiar octave, Yusaku jolted before glaring angrily at his Ignis. Now Ai had really done it; that murderous glint in Yusaku's ice-emerald stare was a warning shot that had come far too late. Before Ai could even think of a way to alleviate its master's fury, Yusaku reached over to mute his Duel Disk. The duelist then took a deep breath in through his nose and returned

to his work, his brows knit tightly together and a firm scowl tugging his lips.

Aoi was getting better day by day.

Ever since her miscarriage, she shouldered a heavy array of emotions that weighed down on her spirit. She could only barely keep up the facade that she was doing well, but what other choice did she really have? She had allowed herself to sulk for a week before making the decision to get back up on her feet, no matter how difficult it was. To suffer the loss of life within her own body at such a young age was undoubtedly a traumatic experience, but Aoi was aware that other women had been in similar situations and ended up fine. What others had done before her was proof that her journey to recovery was not impossible.

She had everything in the world: a loving older brother, money, her good health.

She had *no excuse* to be unhappy.

This was the mantra that she repeated over and over in her head to gain strength.

Oddly enough, it somewhat worked. At the very least, the sight of her own body no longer repulsed her. She could now look at her own reflection without feeling the urge to cry or hurt herself. Her body's failure to carry out a successful pregnancy made her feel like less of a human and even less of a woman. To add insult to injury, Yusaku confirmed that he didn't want her to be pregnant although he would take pity on her and take care of her.

What a *joke*.

She felt like a *bad joke*.

But she had to move on - or at least try to. If she said so herself, she was doing a pretty good job at it too.

From her peripheral, she observed that a figure was approaching her. When she turned her head to see who it was, slight excitement washed over as she realized that it was none other than Takeru. Aoi was fond of him: he was nice and friendly and wonderful. He had done nothing but bring brightness into her life when she needed it most. More so than that, it was refreshing to have someone in her life who was relatively uninvolved in the drama surrounding herself and Yusaku. While it was true that Takeru was Yusaku's friend, it didn't seem like he knew much about what happened, despite Aoi's suspicions in the beginning.

'Takeru-kun.' Aoi smiled. 'Good afternoon.'

'Good afternoon, Zaizen-san. Do you have some time right now?'

'Yes. What's wrong?'

'Nothing.' Takeru cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. *Boy*, did it just get hot and stuffy in his uniform. His anxiety was skyrocketing and the heat was rushing to his cheeks. He could only hope that his face wasn't reddening, but resigned to the notion that it probably was. Whatever. He couldn't back out of this now. He couldn't take any more of his own brain's taunting, nor could he tolerate more of Flame's unsolicited advice on *girls and goddesses*. What was up with his Ignis and goddesses?

'Takeru-kun?'

'U-Um...' he rubbed the back of his neck. 'The thing is... There's something I want to ask you, but I'm worried that you'll get offended or creeped out...'

'You are many things, Homura Takeru-kun.' Aoi giggled sweetly. 'But you're neither creepy nor offensive.'

Reactively, Takeru smiled. Aoi may have just been being polite, but in his naivety, Takeru took her words in higher regard. It was comical, how Aoi had just made his day by confirming that she didn't think he was a bumbling idiot. Takeru realized with some fear that Aoi held ridiculous power over his emotions. How she had managed to slip undetected into his heart was a

mystery, but considering that she had history with Yusaku, Takeru wished that he could just magically rid himself of his feelings for her.

Perhaps this confrontation would be the first step.

However, depending on her answer, the effect may just be the opposite.

'You and Yusaku used to date...' Takeru started, and Aoi's face fell. 'Right?'

'It wasn't like that.' Aoi tried her best to remain composed, but her companion noticed that she was shifting her weight between her feet. 'We never actually dated.'

'Then what happened between you guys?'

Aoi stiffened. How to even answer that question? Should she bother trying to? Even she herself couldn't really put into words what exactly transpired between herself and Yusaku. Long story short... She loved him and he didn't return her feelings, although he tried his best to. There was no real malice stemming from of them, but the pain they caused each other was too profound for forgiveness. Aoi felt that she must have hurt Yusaku, enforcing responsibilities on him even though he rebuffed her from the very beginning.

They weren't good for each other.

End of story.

'Zaizen-san?'

'It just didn't work out.' Aoi replied softly. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear (a nervous tick of hers) and averted her gaze. 'I don't know what else to tell you.'

'I see.' Takeru looked away as well. The air between himself and the girl he liked was heavy with awkward tension. He anticipated that bringing up this topic would render them both uncomfortable, but he needed to know Aoi's

true feelings and intentions to have some peace of mind. It was hellish not knowing how to read her; if she liked him or not, if she was just trying to make Yusaku envious, or if he was completely missing the mark. He needed to know because *he knew* how he felt about her. 'Are you in love with Yusaku?'

'No.'

Takeru laughed anxiously. 'That was quick.'

'Because there's no doubt in my heart about it.' Aoi's tone was firm. 'I *don't* love him.'

'Do you *like* him?'

'No.' she pursed her lips bitterly. 'Not even that.'

'Do you...' he swallowed hard. 'Do you like *me*?'

Aoi's eyes flew to meet Takeru's, which were soulfully wanting. For a brief moment, Aoi felt her heart flutter even though she had looked within herself and come to the conclusion that she wasn't romantically interested in Takeru. Yes, he was charming. *Yes*, he kind. He was everything that she used to want in Yusaku, and that was what made Takeru so attractive. But to have deep, romantic feelings for him? She didn't think so.

'No.'

After feeling stung, Takeru took a deep breath in. He exhaled slowly, collecting his thoughts so that his next spoken words were careful and sensitive. He knew that Aoi meant no harm - but she may have also been acting out of rage towards Yusaku. Maybe she didn't realize it, but she could have just been redirecting her attachment to Yusaku to the nearest possible candidate: Takeru. That was how Takeru read the situation. Strangely, he wasn't at all upset. He knew firsthand how painful Yusaku's iciness could be, and he was also aware that Aoi was a well-meaning but emotional

person. It was only natural that she react with emotional blindness, unaware of the pain she was pushing onto him.

So she didn't like him either after all.

Well, that wasn't anything he couldn't get over in time.

Still, seeing as they were already being honest with each other...

'Zaizen-san... I like you.'

There it was again: Aoi's heart fluttered, warming her body inside out. A slight blush crept on her cheeks and a hand reactively came up so that her fingertips were nestled on her lips in shock. She couldn't believe that Takeru had just confessed to having a crush on her. Furthermore, it was shocking to her that she herself was blown away by her admirer's profession of desire.

'T-Takeru-kun-'

'You don't have to say anything.' Takeru raised his hands in surrender to try and calm Aoi. 'Especially since you already told me how you really feel. It's fine... I just really wanted to tell you.'

'You're wonderful.' she blurted. 'Any girl would be lucky to have you. There are so many-'

'It's fine! Zaizen-san, really!' he waved his arms in panic. 'It's fine, it's fine...'

'It's just surprising. You're just so great, and I really don't deserve you.' Aoi spoke without thinking yet again. It was as if she was operating on a sentimental auto-pilot. Words spilled out of her before she could even think them, and her one singular focus was to buffer any rejection Takeru felt. She knew firsthand what it was like to be rejected, and since Takeru had been nothing but good to her, he was the one person who she didn't want to go through the same pain that she had. 'You-'

'Zaizen-san, we don't need to have this conversation!' he chuckled in broken embarrassment.

'You have so many incredible qualities! You're kind and caring and strong, and, and...' she was frantic. 'You're the best person I've ever met at this school.' she finished, and even she was startled by the magnitude of her speech. But when she looked within herself, she couldn't find a single lie in what she had spoken. Everything she had just said about Takeru, she meant from the bottom of her heart. She wasn't exaggerating to overcompensate - she truly felt that he was a beautiful soul.

Lavender orbs softened and narrowed with unmatched gentleness. 'Thank you, Zaizen-san.'

'The girl you end up with will be the luckiest one in the world.' Aoi whispered. 'Don't worry.'

'I won't.' Takeru smiled and waved as he tilted his body away, indicating that he was about to leave. 'Have a nice day!'

'Takeru-kun!' she called after him, panicked. He stopped in his tracks and flashed her a quizzical expression. 'Are you and I...' she fought to quell the fear inside of her. Takeru had been a stream of light for her for quite a while now, and she didn't want to lose him. 'Are we still friends?'

'Of course... I'll always be here for you.'

Thank you for the constant support and encouragement on this story! It's really such a joy to write this, and I'm feeling more confident that I'll be able to update it more regularly. Thank you especially to those who have engaged in conversation with me about where they think the story should go, what I may be doing wrong, where I'm going right, etcetera. This type of collaborative conversing really helps me engage in writing despite a lack of source material to go off of.

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. To all the Guests who I cannot directly message, thank you for your reviews!

35. BOY

'Thank you.' Akira Zaizen said to the stranger handing him a bouquet of fresh, blue roses. The delivery man nodded and went about his way while Akira shut the door to his apartment. As he made his way to the kitchen so that the robot maid could place the flowers in a vase, he couldn't help but be surprised and somewhat impressed to note that this was the third bouquet sent to his stepsister from Yusaku Fujiki. One bouquet came every week, thus marking the third week since the couple fell apart.

Although the gesture was sweet, Akira screamed internally at the fact that there was still a slither of communication between Aoi and Yusaku. Akira wasn't thrilled about that. Yusaku had broken Aoi's heart into a million pieces and played a major part in imprinting further trauma into her life's blueprint. However, Aoi didn't seem to mind the deliveries and Akira wasn't about to give unsolicited advice. He was tired of fighting with his little sister. He loved her more than anything, and part of showing that care was to trust her. As long as she wasn't torn apart, he gave her the respect of distance. He would only step in when asked to.

That was tortuous for the controlling Akira, but he had no other choice. It was either *play by Aoi's rules* or have her shut him out. Akira chose the former.

'Good morning, Onii-sama.' Aoi greeted as she took her seat at the dining table for breakfast. She was already dressed in her school uniform and seemed to be in higher spirits than usual. There was a slight smile on her lips. Though relieved, Akira was equally suspicious.

Were she and Yusaku talking again?

Deep breath in, Akira willed himself to relax, *Exhale slowly.*

'Good morning.' he returned. 'You only have a month of school left this semester. Are you excited to take a break?'

'Well, I only get a month off.' Aoi replied as her eyes fixated on the white vase of blue roses the robot maid carried into the living room. The vase was set on top of the coffee table, which didn't seem like a glamorous enough pedestal for it, but would have to do within the Zaizens' subtle living aesthetic. Besides, the royal blue hue of the roses alone was a standout. Perhaps it was meant to be that they were the sole vibrancy in an otherwise pastel colorboard.

Akira observed Aoi's fixation on the flowers. She didn't seem to be upset or overly excited at this point as it had become routine, but there was a gleam in her eyes that was indicative of pleasure. She enjoyed receiving these gifts. Akira couldn't blame her. What person wouldn't want to receive a token of affection from the person they loved?

But Akira was concerned that because of these constant reminders of Yusaku *from* Yusaku, Aoi would never be able to get over him.

'They're always so beautiful.'

SOL Technologies' Security Manager cleared his throat. 'Yes. They are... Nice of *that guy* to send them all the time.'

'Mhmm...'

'Aoi, do you want to go somewhere out of town for the summer?' Akira asked, earning a jolt from Aoi. She shot him widened eyes and tightly knit brows. They had never gone on a trip before. Ever since their parents passed away, Akira was just so busy trying to either survive or climb the corporate ladder. A vacation was normally out of the question. It didn't even sound like a good idea now that they were financially stable. Akira was such a workaholic that Aoi feared he would suffer an aneurysm if he left his office for too long.

'Onii-sama... Do you have time for that?'

'Yes.' he nodded. 'I've never availed of my days off, so it would be easy for me to do so now. I could also bring my work phone, so I would still be

active in the company to some extent.'

'I knew you wouldn't be able to take a total break from SOL Technologies.'

Akira huffed in frustration. 'That's not the point.'

'What's the use of taking a vacation then?'

'To get away from here.'

'What do you have to get away from?' Aoi pressed, her expression turning hard. 'I'd still be with you.'

'No matter how much you try and imply that you've ever been a burden to me, I'll never bite.' Akira said softly. 'I'm thankful every day that I have you, barring all that we go through.'

Aoi didn't respond, but her posture was eerily still for a long moment. Then, she wiped the corners of her eyes with her knuckles. She made no sound but Akira knew that she was crying.

'I want you to be able to get away from here for a while.' Akira continued. 'A change of scenery might be therapeutic.'

'Do you think there's something wrong with me *now*?'

'No. Only you would know, right?'

Aoi didn't say anything back.

'The offer is on the table.' he took a sip of coffee but his eyes never left her. 'Take it if you'd like. You know, it would just be nice to spend some time together. Yes, I'd be working, but my timetable would be much more lenient. We'd still be spending more time together.'

'Well... I'll think about it, Onii-sama.'

Hi. How are you?

No... Too casual...

...

Good morning.

I should probably say something more than that.

...

Can I see you later?

I hate myself, Yusaku thought with a groan. He deleted what was perhaps the hundredth draft text of that morning and decidedly gave up on finalizing a message. Still laying on his bed, he flung his cellphone in a random direction only to hear it stumble loudly to the wooden floor. He didn't care. Maybe it was better if he broke his phone. That way, he wouldn't be tempted to text Aoi.

'Playmaker, get ready for school!' Ai boomed from its Duel Disk atop the desk. 'You're going to be late!'

'I know.' the student grumbled as he stood from his mattress. He took a quick shower and dressed himself before heading out. Ai was tucked away safely in his bag. He didn't feel like wearing his Duel Disk. His body was aching, as if being crushed by an invisible force. This pain was only growing, and he dare not exacerbate it by carrying unnecessary luggage on his limbs. He feared that the pain in his back would radiate to his arms.

The trek to school was marred in silence. It was out of character for Ai to be quiet, but the Ignis was aware that its master was going through emotional turmoil. Despite its childish demeanour, Ai knew better than to pry into Yusaku's heart when it was broken. Strangely, Yusaku actually missed Ai's rambling. At least it provided a distraction. Today, however, it seemed as if he would have to face his dark thoughts alone.

As he passed the school gates, he had the unfortunate luck of bumping into Aoi, who was also making her way to the main building where they both had classes. The pair stopped abruptly upon seeing each other, but the woman behind Blue Angel collected herself quickly. After all, she didn't lead a successful double life without excellent acting skills. She may have been boiling inside at the sight of the man who scorned her, but she was going to face him as if he didn't bother her in the slightest.

'Good morning, Fujiki Yusaku-kun.'

'Good morning.' he returned in a tone gentler than his usual. This change in behaviour did not go unnoticed by Aoi, whose jaw dropped. She stumbled a little from surprise, but continued on her way past Yusaku. She desperately wanted to look back and take a peek if he was staring after her or not, but decided that it would do neither of them any good. If anything, this unexpected display of warmth was probably just another dimension to a game only he knew how to win.

When she was out of earshot, Ai spoke, 'Why don't you go after her?'

'There's no use. What would I tell her?'

'Don't pretend like there isn't something you want to get off your chest. I know you were trying to text her this morning.'

'Regardless, does she look like she's in the mood to talk to me?' Yusaku snapped.

'Even so... I thought you'd try. I thought she meant more to you.'

'I have. And she *does*.'

'Then why are you treating her like a stranger?!'

'I don't know! Shut up already!' the strongest duelist in Den City was *flustered*. This had become a normal reaction whenever the topics of Aoi and his subsequent reactions to her were brought up. His behaviour was

confusing not just to others, but also to himself. How could he answer Ai's inquiries into his head when he himself couldn't figure out for the life of him why he was emotionally unavailable?

Heartless?

Whatever remained of his heart, he would have liked to give to Aoi - but he wasn't quite so sure if there was much left to offer.

Then again, wasn't she worth it? Shouldn't he dig into the darkest recesses of himself to find what remained? Although it was going to be a difficult feat, Yusaku thought that he at least he owed it to her to become painfully human, if only temporarily.

When classes ended for the day, Aoi looked forward to getting home and taking a long nap. With the end of the school year drawing closer, every day spent in lecture halls was excruciatingly lengthy. Especially now that her brother had proposed to take a vacation for the summer break, Aoi had something to look forward to as time rolled on. The idea of seeing the world outside of this suffocatingly small city was exciting.

'Zaizen-san!'

Aoi looked over her shoulder to see Takeru Homura waving at her. He jogged towards her with a big smile on his face. It was infections. Aoi smiled back, and her heart swelled at Takeru's calming presence. He was such a good person. She admired him. His airy spirit livened her soul.

'Takeru-kun.' she returned playfully. 'How was your day?'

'It was alright! I'm still having a hard time with math...' he winced. 'But let's not dwell on the negative! How are you doing?'

'I'm fine. Why do you ask?'

'No reason. Can't I just want to check up on you?'

'Yeah.' Aoi's eyes warmed. 'Of course you can.'

He smiled.

'You know, I really appreciate the weekly flowers.' Aoi laughed. 'But you don't need to keep sending them.'

At that, the transfer student's grin fell. Flowers? What did she mean by that? He never sent any. 'What are you talking about?'

'Huh? I'm talking about the blue roses-'

'Blue roses are a thing?!' his jaw dropped. 'Whoa! I never knew!'

'Takeru-kun.' Aoi was becoming nervous and it was evident in the grave turn of her tone. Her expression was hard, and she glared at her companion with almost accusatory suspicion. His perpetually enthusiastic aura was often a source of delight for her, but at the moment it was only irritating her. 'Stop playing around. Weren't you sending me flowers every week?'

'No.'

Aoi's heart dropped.

It could have only been one other person then.

Her limbs went numb and her face paled. Takeru appeared concerned and proceeded to rain a dozen questions on her, but she couldn't hear him. The revelation that Yusaku had been the one sending her flowers shouldn't have struck her so hard, but if she were being perfectly honest, she would have preferred if he just forgot that she ever existed. This was ridiculous. How could Yusaku still be playing this game with her? How could he still want to lure her into his arms so that he could wrap his hands around her neck like a ceremonial noose?

How many times was he going to hurt her?

Takeru kept on trying to stimulate a reaction from her, but Aoi eventually simply turned her back on him and walked home. Her heart was beating so fast that she wondered if it could have punched out of her chest. She stepped foot into the apartment and her brother wasn't around: perfect. This meant that she was free to be upset without him worrying about her. Before climbing up the staircase to her room, she noticed the vase of blue roses on the coffee table.

She picked it up and emptied its contents into the trash.

Fuck him.

She was *never* going to make space for Yusaku in her life. Not again. Not ever.

A surge of anger coursed through her. Suddenly, all she wanted to do was pick up the phone and dial Yusaku's number so that she could scream at him. All the pent up frustration she held inside from whenever she smiled at him as he kicked her aside was now reaching a fatal centigrade.

Except, she didn't have to do that, since her phone was already ringing with **YUSAKU FUJIKI** on the caller ID.

Ai was right.

Yusaku didn't want to admit it, but his Ignis had a point. Aoi deserved more closure than she ever got from him. Truthfully, Yusaku wanted to give it to her, but he didn't know what to say. He was sorry - that much he knew. He was sorry for everything. Most of all, he was sorry that right till the very end, he couldn't give her an ounce of happiness.

Thank you for trying to love me, she had said.

But I did love you, Yusaku thought painfully, *I still do*.

Just not enough to change.

This was the inconvenient truth Yusaku held about himself: he was only willing to let into his heart those who played by his rules. Heavens forbid someone dare stand up for themselves in his presence, because it meant that he had lost control. This aggressive social domination was both defensive and due to arrogance. Yusaku had gotten used to being alone, to calling the shots of his life's story, so much so that an unpredictable factor like Aoi Zaizen was more of a threat than anything else.

But he still wanted her.

So...

Yusaku set up their relationship for failure. He indulged in their sensual play in such a way that underlined the notion that they could only love each other whenever *he felt like it*. This way, he held some control over the situation. He didn't want to get lost in emotions because the fact of the matter was that he simply didn't trust Aoi to not hurt him. Yusaku was aware that this fear of others was powered in large part by his trauma, but couldn't seem to detach from this line of thinking. He was so protective over himself that he failed to truly realize just how much she was hurting. Moreover, cutting Aoi off didn't mean that there weren't lasting consequences from their lovemaking, the heaviest darkness of all being her pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage.

He didn't expect the loss of a mass of cells could numb him terribly, but it did. That was taking into account that he frankly didn't want the baby nor did he carry it inside of himself. He could only imagine how much more distressing the experience was for Aoi. When she told him about the miscarriage, he knew he didn't react appropriately. He didn't know *how* to. Aoi was chaotically emotional and he feared that if he so much as touched her, she would lash out at him - he wouldn't have been able to handle that.

Still, he should have done *something*.

He couldn't take back the time that he took away from her, but he could step down from his pedestal of power.

He rubbed his temples and reached for his cellphone. After dialling Aoi's number, steady ringing made him anxious. What if she didn't pick up? What if she did? What would she say? What would *he* say, apart from an overdue *sorry!* and admitting to being a piece of shit?

Besides, she wasn't answering.

As he was about to end the call, Aoi picked up. Yusaku heard the definitive click on her end, but she didn't talk. Whether that was because she was at a loss for words or she was too angry at him to start a conversation was up for debate. Yet, that wasn't why he was calling her. Regardless of how she felt about him now, he needed to bow his head and admit to his wrongdoigns.

After all, despite everything, that was what Aoi kept asking for: the truth.

'Hey...' Yusaku started in a whisper. 'Good evening.'

Still no response. The silence was nerve-wracking.

Yusaku was not in the slightest deterred.

'I'm sorry, Aoi. I was never good to you.' he continued. 'You loved me wholeheartedly and I was too afraid to do the same. I didn't trust you, and in the end, it cost me my integrity as a man towards you.' he paused, hoping that she would respond. When she didn't, he gave himself a mental *fuck it* before continuing, 'I messed up. I hurt you and nothing I say or do will ever make it up to you... But, I just wanted to tell you that I'm so sorry-'

'What is the *fucking point* of telling me this now?!'

'A-Ah-' Yusaku stumbled with words that hadn't fully formed in his mind. He didn't anticipate Aoi interrupting him, nor did he reckon that she would sound so *intimidating*. Chockfull of raw emotion, her voice was like a hammer weighing down final judgement on him.

'Is this supposed to be good news?' Aoi demanded between heavy breaths. Her heart was beating at a million miles a minute. Speaking in itself was

difficult, but to go through the emotional turmoil of speaking to Yusaku again drove her over the edge of self-restraint. 'Not only did you not love me, but you didn't trust me either!'

Yusaku was paralyzed with shock, the only sensation he felt being the ominous churning of his gut. He didn't realize until she pointed out just how insulting his revelation was. Rather than begin a healing process, he had only cut her deeper.

'I lost your baby and you didn't even hold me.' her voice cracked. 'You don't love or care about me, but you keep sending me flowers to keep me wrapped around your finger!'

'That's not why-'

'I'm so sick of your mind games! I'm just a body to you! Is this what you do to all the girls you wanna fuck around with?! How fucked up of a person can you be?!'

Yusaku swallowed hard. He pinched the bridge of his nose and screwed his eyes shut. Aoi was being incredibly hurtful, and he so desperately wanted to fight back, but he knew that his arguments would fall on deaf ears. Although three weeks had elapsed since the last time they spoke properly, it was evident that the time to have a meaningful conversation had not yet arrived.

'This is not why I called.' Yusaku finally said. 'I don't want to fight. I just want to talk to you.'

'Well, I don't want to. I'm not ready.' she tried to calm down, but her tone was tearful. 'I just want to move on right now. Please don't call me again.' she forced herself to say. 'I'm so tired. I just want some peace. I can't... I can't talk to you.'

Without waiting for a response, she ended the call and shut off her phone.

Nevertheless, the strain of speaking to Yusaku again had begun to take its toll. Tears streamed down her face and she covered her mouth to silence herself. The sobs still escaped her, and it was difficult to breathe steadily.

Akira, who had arrived home a few minutes earlier and heard Aoi's distress, made his way to her bedroom.

'Aoi...' Akira called out, worried, as he walked over to his sister. 'Aoi, what's wrong?' he sat beside her and rubbed her back soothingly. He already had a vague idea of why she was upset, but he wasn't about to press her for information. Aoi would only tell him what she was comfortable sharing, and Akira accepted this boundary without question.

'Onii-sama.' she managed. 'That vacation... Are you still offering it?'

'Of course.'

'Can we do it?'

'Yes.' he smiled with a tranquil sadness. 'Where would you like to go?'

'Anywhere. Just away from here.'

Thank you to everyone supporting this story! I'm overwhelmed by the continued encouragement and conversations I've had surrounding this story. I never can clearly communicate just how much your interest and support mean to me. I'm especially thankful for the insightful messages that further my own understanding of the characters. Writing this story is such a joy, and I hope to continue updating regularly!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. To all the Guests, thank you for your reviews and continued encouragement!

36. Heartless Men Still Bleed

When Aoi hung up, Yusaku wanted nothing more than to call her back.

But...

Please don't, she had said.

So he didn't.

Even though he wanted nothing more than to speak to her just once more, he chose to obey her wishes. He fought the instinctive need to put his desires first because he at the very least wanted to prove to himself that he could provide genuine care for another human being. After tucking away his cellphone in his desk drawer for the evening, he took a quick shower and went to bed - well, he tried to. The reality was that he spent a good half hour tossing and turning, and the next two hours staring blankly up at the ceiling as he fought to shake off waves of baseless rationale predicting how Aoi would respond to seeing him tomorrow morning.

What if she lashed out at him again? What if she cried? What if she was her usual, flippant, *Good morning*, *Fujiki-kun* stone face? What if she completely ignored him? Yusaku didn't think that he would be ready for *any* of those scenarios simply because he wasn't sure he could come face-to-face with her again.

The next morning rolled in, and Yusaku's head was pounding as he walked to school. Ai was quiet for a change, thank goodness. The Ignis concluded that when concerning matters of the heart, Yusaku was best left to his own devices. Not only was the strongest duelist in all of LINK VRAINS confidential about his emotions, but he was long overdue for an intimate self-examination. Ai decided that if there was a good time to leave Yusaku alone, it was now.

Even if he was at a loss on how to navigate his emotions, Yusaku was still setting out on his own journey of personal discovery. It was a normal for him not to get anywhere in the beginning, but the lack of clarity frightened

him. However, he was willing to go through with it to shed the stamp of evil that underlined him as *heartless*.

Surely enough, Yusaku caught sight of Aoi as he turned the corner on his way to his classroom. As the pair usually bumped into each other at this area, neither were surprised to see the other. Nevertheless, the remnants of Aoi's anger from last night seeped into the unsuspecting morning, manifesting as a hard glare as she wordlessly pushed past him.

So now they weren't on *Good morning!* terms anymore?

Yusaku looked over his shoulder to watch Aoi march away with a furious kick to her step. The prickling urge to chase after her nipped at him, but he fought it. She wanted to be left alone. He had to give her that. Feeding his ego was no longer worth hurting her. It never really was, but he was too concerned about his own self to fathom just how deeply he was burying a jagged knife into her.

I'm done. I don't want to keep doing this to her.

'Yusaku!' Takeru Homura called, seemingly out of nowhere. Yusaku's attention was brought back to the front as his most trusted confidante made his way over. As usual, Takeru's lavender orbs brimmed with excitement. He was always in a good mood, it seemed.

Takeru was, in general, a good person.

Yusaku wished he could be like that.

'Hey.'

'I saw you with Zaizen-san just now.' Takeru blurted, much to Yusaku's chagrin. The unfriendly student quirked a brow. Takeru wasn't beating around the bush today, was he? 'You guys didn't even talk. What was that about? I mean...' he winced. 'She looks...'

The words trailed off and the air between the two men thickened. Of course, Takeru was genuinely worried. Yusaku was his best friend and Aoi was a girl he liked but was trying to get over (Yikes!). Yusaku knew that Takeru's inquisition was free from malice, but he didn't know how to respond appropriately considering that 1) he was all too aware that Takeru liked Aoi and being truthful meant admitting that he and Aoi were cut clean from each other, and 2) he didn't want to delve much into his love life.

'We had a fight.' Yusaku finally said. 'It was my fault.'

'Oh... You didn't apologise?'

'I did. But that's not what she wanted.'

'Then what can you do to fix it?'

Yusaku shrugged in an effort to look less concerned than he actually was. 'She told me to leave her alone. So that's what I'll be doing from now on.'

'Oh...' Takeru averted his gaze. It was obvious that he was unsatisfied with his friend's response. He flame-themed duelist contemplated dropping the subject, but his brave soul deemed it more helpful if he steamrolled through the hard topics. 'Don't you want to mend your issues with her though? Isn't that why you keep sending her flowers?'

Yusaku's gut twisted. 'How do you know about that?'

'I spoke to her yesterday.' he paused. Then, 'Up until our conversation, she thought that I was the one sending them.'

Yusaku scoffed bitterly. 'That's why she kept accepting them. Now that she knows, I bet she's thrown them all away.'

Takeru frowned. 'Was she upset that you were sending her flowers?'

'Kind of. Not really.'

'Then...?'

'My persistence irritates her.' Yusaku explained as his eyes narrowed sadly. His companion saw the unmistakable, rare emotion adding vibrance to already intense emerald orbs. Somehow, the blast of sentiment in Yusaku's hardened features made him appear beautifully human. 'I wasn't there for when she wanted me, or when she needed my care the most. Now that the dust has settled, she refuses to let me into her life. I don't blame her. I...' he cleared his throat. 'Well, there's nothing I can do now.'

But Takeru was not about to let go of the conversation. 'I don't get it. I've known for a while that you like her... So what do you mean you weren't there for her when she wanted you? You wanted her back.'

'I pushed her away.'

'Yusaku...' Takeru sighed. 'You've got to stop doing that.'

'I'm not like you.' Yusaku's tone turned defensive and slightly envious. 'Takeru, you effectively dealt with your trauma. I thought getting revenge would help me do that, but I still have a hard time connecting to people.'

'We're friends though, aren't we?'

'But she didn't want to be friends. She wanted to be in love, and I just... It's like...' Yusaku wracked his brain for the right words. 'It's as if I was afraid of letting her in because she would hurt me. And when she didn't back off, I was even more frightened, and...' he inhaled sharply. 'I wish I was a good person.'

'You're the best guy I've ever met.' Takeru replied sincerely. 'It's normal to have fights with girls. What man can honestly say that he's never had an argument with his girlfriend?'

Yusaku shook his head. 'You just don't know.'

After that, Yusaku walked to class. Takeru decided that it was best if he make his way to his classroom as well, although he had a million questions burning at the back of his mind. He made a mental note to ask Yusaku about

them later. Seeing as the overly private student had opened up just now, Takeru was confident that he could continue this discussion.

But when the two men met up for lunch at their usual bench, Yusaku was deathly quiet. It was obvious that he was deep in thought, and Takeru dare not interrupt. The pair parted ways to go to their respective lessons, but both of their minds were elsewhere. Yusaku couldn't shake Aoi out of his head, and Takeru couldn't stop wondering how he could get them to make up. In his heart, Takeru held deep care for both of his friends - he only wanted them to be happy, and he couldn't for the life of him understand why they just couldn't get together if they both had feelings for each other.

He didn't have the full story, but Yusaku wasn't about to give it to him.

The morning set the clock of the next day, and Yusaku awoke with an excruciatingly painful back. He groaned when he rolled out of bed. As he stood, his head dizzied. He felt sick, but he had no external symptoms of illness such as a fever or runny nose. While he wouldn't admit it to anyone, he wondered himself if his nerves were truly damaged or if the pain he experienced periodically was psychologically induced.

'Playmaker-sama.' Ai teased from the desk. 'Your back hurting again?'

'Be quiet.'

He quickly showered and dressed before heading to school. The pain was now radiating to his thighs, but he clenched his teeth and continued with his trek. Now that he and Aoi had fallen apart disastrously, he knew that this ache would only worsen. There was no point whining about it. He might as well get used to it. Despite his condition, his pace when climbing the stairs to his classroom was faster than normal.

The reason?

He didn't want to bump into Aoi.

She wanted him to disappear from her sight, and he was going to honour that.

The rest of the day came and went uneventfully. Takeru didn't bring up their conversation from yesterday, which Yusaku appreciated. Then again, when he gave it more thought, Yusaku knew that if Takeru insisted on bringing up the topic that they would get into a disagreement. That was something Yusaku had to face about himself: he was placated so long as his boundaries were respect, but he had to ask himself who branded him king to create those limits in the first place?

Aoi wasn't like Takeru or Kusanagi-san. She didn't want to be a friend, she wanted to be loved and to love without restraint. She didn't want to be shackled by boundaries, and yet Yusaku tried to enforce them on her anyway.

It was the biggest crime he had ever committed.

Aoi was so beautiful, and beautifully unpredictable. For Yusaku to try and cage her was cruelty to the nth degree.

The entire week was spent avoiding her.

He purposely timed himself so that he wouldn't see her during moments in the day when he normally would. Surprisingly, he was successful. It was almost suspect how good he was at avoiding her. As the days passed, his pain grew. It had gotten to the point where sleep was impossible. Even Ai could no longer poke fun at its master, who was suffering intensely.

Even the weekend was tortuous.

On Sunday, he assisted Shoichi with selling hot dogs from the truck. He tried his best (which wasn't very good) to grill the links of meat without making a show out of his backache, but Shoichi still noticed the hitch in his junior's movements.

'Hey...' the older man spoke. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'Ai.' Shoichi turned his attention to the Ignis perched on top of the ice cream machine. 'Care to explain?'

'Trouble in paradise.' Ai squeaked. 'Cutie wasn't so cute to him last week.'

'Meaning?'

'It's nothing, Kusanagi-san.' he sighed. 'I'm fine.'

'You don't look fine.' the vendor frowned. 'You're clearly unwell.'

'I'm *fine*. Really.'

And that was that. Yusaku went back to his mediocre cooking, and Shoichi watched him in silence. There was no point trying to reason with Yusaku. No matter what, he wasn't going to open up. Shoichi wasn't about to push the envelope and press for more information either. He knew his place in Yusaku's life and dare not overstep the clear lines of what he was permitted to do.

Aoi remained the only one who ignored all boundaries.

Yusaku grit his teeth.

Why was he thinking about her again?

Get out of my head. Get out of my head, get out of my head...

It was impossible.

Suddenly, he swatted his left wrist. He felt a tinge of sharpness just then, as if he had been bitten by a mosquito. However, when he checked the area that he hit, no bite marks or swelling akin of insect bites could be seen.

But now it was just so *itchy*.

A couple of weeks passed. Yusaku didn't hear from Aoi, nor did he see her on campus. He didn't give it much thought other than they were both probably doing a fantastic job of mutually avoiding each other. He hoped that not physically seeing her would ease his increasingly uncomfortable muscle spasms, but the effect was the opposite. Being deprived of Aoi only inflamed his desire to see her again until he was itchy and sore beneath his skin. Particularly, his left wrist and the entirety of his chest was scratched up from his own nails.

It was like a curse.

The more he thought about Aoi, the greater the urge to dig into his own skin. He wasn't doing it on purpose. He genuinely could feel the mild, irritating burn begin its onslaught, until it was so intense that he could no longer hold himself back. Scratching his flesh was the only way to get relief. Ignoring his symptoms had proven futile.

Thankfully, he eventually acquired some means of distraction.

It was finally the week before the semester's end and he was always up late at night studying. Though he didn't place much importance on his studies on an intrinsic level, he wanted to do well so that the teachers wouldn't bat an eye whenever he took a nap during lectures. Furthermore, he saw no harm in expanding his knowledge outside of technology and computer programming. It gave him something to do other than pine over a girl who wanted nothing to do with him.

But it wasn't enough.

Nothing was *ever enough*.

'She's gone.' Takeru randomly declared one day during lunch.

'Huh?' Yusaku's heart twisted sickeningly. 'What?'

'I said, she's gone.'

'Who?'

'Zaizen-san. She left Den City.'

Yusaku felt like he had taken a hard punch to the chest. His heart must have stopped momentarily, for the sensation of his soul leaving his body was all too real. The entirety of his being went numb.

'What do you mean?'

'She didn't show up this week at all.' Takeru explained. There was a tinge of sadness in his voice. 'She didn't tell anyone. I tried calling her, but she didn't pick up. Shima-kun said that she had taken her exams early so she didn't need to come to school. I went by her place to see if she was home, but the receptionist said that the Zaizen family had gone out of town.'

'Oh... I see.'

Try as he might to remain composed, Yusaku was bursting inside.

Aoi was gone.

There was no chance of fixing their broken relationship.

That was when reality had truly begun to sink in. Dark, unmistakable depression creased Yusaku's face as bags under his eyes and tightly knit brows. He felt rejected in the harshest way. Aoi left him. She abandoned him all alone in the same abyss she claimed she wanted to pull him out from. What he loved about her was that she would always try to care for him despite his protests. She never gave up on him, and that was why he felt a close bond with her.

But now, she was gone.

Could he blame her? After treating her like shit, it was easy to see why she would turn her back on him. The only surprising fact about the situation was that she hadn't done it sooner. Even so, Yusaku couldn't help but

wonder... Where had she gone? What was she doing? Was she safe? Was she thinking about him? How was she coping with her miscarriage? Was she in pain?

Did she hate him?

Yusaku never got an answer.

The last day of class had finally arrived. Yusaku was confident that he performed well in his exams despite his deteriorating body hampering his efforts. It was hard to concentrate on academic work when he couldn't get a good night's sleep. His late nights were a product of his incessant itching and debilitating backaches. Nevertheless, he wasn't to defeat his own purpose. He was proud of his performance in his work. He didn't once have to guess an answer, and he found the questions to be straight-forward. Either he knew it or he didn't.

Except, he wasn't Playmaker if he didn't know all the answers.

He knew them all except the one in his head, the one carved into his skull with invisible ink - the words he could read every time he shut his eyes.

Did Aoi hate him?

She really wasn't at school all week. It was just as Takeru said - she had gone on vacation and sat her exams early. Yusaku confirmed this story from Naoki Shima, who flashed a mischievous grin when approached by his mysterious classmate.

'Eh? Fujiki, you don't keep tabs on your own girlfriend?' Naoki had laughed.

'She's not my girlfriend.'

'*Right*.'

Later that day when the school officially closed its gates for the summer, Yusaku and Takeru walked over to Shoichi's hot dog truck at the Viewing Plaza. They were going to celebrate the end of an academic year. Apparently, Shoichi connived with the Ignises to host a mini-party for the duelists. Ai and Flame convinced their masters to pay Shoichi a visit, while the salesman was busy adding the final touches to a casual after-school buffet of sausages and fries. This time, however, Shoichi stepped his food preparation up a notch.

Usually, he served ketchup and mustard as condiments to his hot dogs.

Today was special, so it was the perfect opportunity to bring out the *honey mustard*.

'Thank you!' Takeru beamed when the banquet was revealed outside the truck, on a nearby bench. 'Looks good!'

'Thank you, Kusanagi-san.' Yusaku couldn't help but offer a small smile. His heart was breaking inside, but he tried to remind himself that he at the very least had comrades like the two men before him. It eased his pain just a little.

'You didn't have go through all this trouble.' Takeru added. 'We should at least have brought soda so you wouldn't concern yourself over drinks!'

'See?' Shoichi laughed. 'This is exactly why I like taking care of this stuff myself. Everyone knows that coffee's a way better partner for hot dogs. Here...' he picked one up and handed it to Yusaku. 'Don't be shy! Take it!'

'Ah...' Yusaku offered a small smile. 'Thanks.'

As he reached out to take out, Shoichi's eyes widened and he gasped, 'Yusaku! Your wrist...!'

'What?' Takeru chimed in. His attention fell to his friend's wrist and he, too, cried out, 'Whoa! What happened?!'

Yusaku, started by the sudden shift of attention to himself, withdrew his hand. Well, he couldn't blame his companions for noticing it. By now, he had scratched the surface nearly clean off, exposing the sensitive, pale-pink layer beneath. He tried to cover it up with some bandaids, but he was constantly bleeding as he kept reopening his wounds with his persistent scratching. The blood vessels around where he attacked himself were popping as well, dotting the untouched parts of him with angry-looking red splotches.

'It's nothing.' Yusaku brushed the concerns off. 'I'm fine.'

'Sure you are.' Ai quipped. 'It's not like you haven't been eating, sleeping, or brushing your hair.'

'Please tell me that was sarcasm.' Flame groaned. 'Because Yusaku has definitely *not* been brushing his hair.' it sneered, leering at the messy man on the aforementioned human's head.

'Yusaku, you're sick and you should go to the doctor.' Shoichi put his foot down. This was ridiculous. It was a well-known fact that Yusaku wasn't the best at taking care of himself, but this was just beyond the point of being reasonable. 'I'll take you there myself.'

'What, are you going to strap me down and force me to go?' Yusaku scoffed. 'I'm fine. Don't concern yourself with me.'

Shoichi and Takeru exchanged glances.

Neither dare cross Yusaku's boundaries.

The midsummer heat was close to unbearable.

Yusaku was scorching hot, to the point wherein he had been reduced to a limp mess on his bed. He was wearing even fewer clothes than he liked: just a white t-shirt and blue jeans. His back was killing him, Takeru and the

Ignises were chattering away at high volume, and he had scratched his chest and left arm raw. It wasn't a good day. Not at all.

'Oh, yeah!' Takeru turned his attention to Yusaku. He reached into his messenger bag to take out a tube of medical-grade cream. Then, he sat himself on the mattress so that he could hand the goods over to his comrade. 'I brought you some ointment.' he continued. 'It'll help with the wounds.'

'Thanks.' Yusaku grumbled and took the tube. He applied it over his arm first, wincing at the sting. But at this point, he was willing to try anything to relieve himself of this mysterious illness.

'So...' Takeru cleared his throat. 'I spoke to Zaizen-san today.'

Yusaku sat up abruptly, as if burnt by those words. 'What? When?'

'This morning. I called her, and by some miracle, she picked up.'

'Where is she? Is she OK?' he paused. 'Is she coming to school next month?'

'Yeah. She's coming back. And she's doing well. She's in Kyoto with her brother. Apparently, he's on his phone a lot so Zaizen-san gets a lot of time to herself.' Takeru laughed in fond recollection of his conversation with Aoi. 'She sounds more relaxed somehow.' he inhaled deeply. 'She asked about you.'

Yusaku's cold, green gaze softened.

'I lied. I said you were fine.' Takeru continued. 'And she said that she was glad.'

'I see...' Yusaku choked. 'Did she say anything more?'

'Yeah. She said that she was thinking about you a lot.'

Yusaku couldn't speak. Emotion had taken its toll on his ability to form words. His eyes watered with sentimentality, but he never cried. He wasn't

going to start now, no matter how shaken his broken heart was. He swallowed a hard lump at his throat and willed himself to remain composed.

'She said that she wanted you to be happy.' Takeru revealed. 'And that she was hurt when she realised that she could never give you that feeling, but that she wanted you to have it. She said that one day, you would learn to smile more often.'

'Ah...'

'So by the time school starts...' he nudged Yusaku. 'You better have your shit together.'

Yusaku shut his eyes and exhaled slowly.

'Don't let her see you like this, Yusaku.'

Yusaku nodded.

It was over.

He and Aoi had closed their chapter together. There was no bitterness on either end, but there was no hope of falling in love at their next reunion either. Or perhaps, ever. Aoi wanted nothing to do with him, but she also wanted him to live a full life free from the trauma that prevented him from loving her in the way she deserved. He hated himself for making Aoi feel like she was incapable of making him happy, but there was nothing he could do to take his sins back. He was paying for them now with his endless thoughts on their failed relationship.

But Aoi shouldn't have to pay for it anymore. He didn't want to make her upset or sad. Or *guilty* when she'd see his current state. He couldn't do that to her. Even though she had been cold to him, her shamelessly caring nature preceded her emotions.

He was going to take care of himself.

Yusaku vowed to never give Aoi a reason to cry ever again.

Thank you to everyone encouraging me throughout this story. I cannot thank you enough for the support! Aoi will be back next chapter, and her relationship with all of the characters will be quite different considering that she had time away from them. I'm excited to begin the next arc of this story and I hope that you enjoy it!

I also wanted to publicly thank Leechan1993 and Ghostkid33 for always compelling me to consider different approaches to exploring the VRAINS characters. Without their help, this story would have turned out differently... and for the worse!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below!

Thank to you to all the Guests who review!

Aniki, thank you so much for your reviews and continued support! I truly have missed your insight on the chapters, but I'm glad that I'm now able to enjoy your commentary again. Thank you again for your constant encouragement.

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Yujo0147, thank you so much for your continued encouragement! I hope you're feeling better and I'm glad to hear from you at all.

37. Their New Reality

Aoi's trip to Kyoto with Akira was pretty much what she expected it would be.

Akira had the best intentions: he wanted to take her away from Den City so that she could have the mental and physical spaces to breathe. However, when the siblings arrived at their hotel suite, the first the businessman did was boot his laptop up and work. If he wasn't preoccupied with his computer, he was on his phone, furiously texting. Aoi knew that this would happen. She wasn't angry. Actually, she was sort of relieved. With work keeping Akira busy, he wouldn't pry into her personal life much.

Knowing full well that she would have to spend the next hour (at least) entertaining herself, Aoi decided that she should kill some time exploring the hotel. She plucked a white dress from her suitcase, slipped it on quickly, and dashed out the door before Akira could protest. Not that he was going to, anyway. Rather, he was relieved that Aoi was taking the initiative to keep herself busy. He'd prefer that outcome over her cooping herself up in a room.

Was there anything special about the hotel?

Not really. Aoi held the opinion that it was just another lavish, five-star establishment. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate staying here, it was difficult for her to develop an affinity to a place that was strange to her. She didn't have any memories from here, nor was she setting out on a special liaison. This was just a spur-of-the-moment getaway so that she and Akira could get away from Den City. She wasn't going to find anything here. Essentially, she was in hiding.

It was soon clear, however, that Aoi could never run from her racing mind.

Having investigated the near-entirety of the hotel, she decided to relax by the pool. It was mostly empty, save for a few children splashing around in the pool. Aoi searched her surroundings for the parents, who she found sunbathing on straw lounge chairs. The husband observed the children

intently as he held his sleeping wife's hand firmly in his own. Aoi couldn't help but smile at the beautifully mundane showcase of familial bonds. It was what she hoped for, and missed, about her own family.

When she lost her father, a gaping wound formed in her heart. Yes, her mother was good to her, but to have a father figure forcibly removed from her life was an event that Aoi never did get over. Her sadness was somewhat quelled when her mother remarried, and Aoi once more found herself in a proper family unit with her newfound stepfather and stepbrother. She felt normal again, although it was a different kind of normalcy. However, her mother was then ripped from her as well as her stepfather, leaving only Akira to take care of Aoi.

She, of course, never had the feeling that Akira was inadequate. Aoi loved her brother with all her heart. More so than that, she admired him. Furthermore, she was aware of the sacrifices he made for her sake, and for that, she would never be able to repay him. The more distant Akira became, the clearer Aoi was able to see just how much he did in the name of providing for her. Perhaps that was why she had developed a brother complex, placing Akira on an impossibly high pedestal and quite literally living to earn his approval.

Until she started living for herself - which inevitably meant that her goals would diverge from Akira's.

In the beginning, Aoi didn't think that she was being unreasonable. She wanted to be Blue Angel to gain her brother's recognition, *yes*, but she had also adopted that persona as a means of escaping the luxury prison he had crafted for her. Their apartment was suffocatingly silent, and because Akira was always at work, Aoi felt miserably alone. Then, she became Blue Girl: she wanted to fight for those who had fought for her, but she was also wiggling herself around all the fuss with the Ignises to find her place of importance in a virtual world that she was fond of.

In all the mess she rolled around in, she was finally able to understand who she was - no matter how ugly or raw the truth was.

Aoi wanted to love and be loved. She wanted nothing more than this reciprocal relationship she fantasized about in her head. Cliché, girlish dreams of being held and treasured by a man she genuinely loved. It was challenging to accept this secret wish of hers. After all, she liked to think of herself as a strong woman who didn't need a man to stand on her own two feet. Then again, she had been standing *and* stumbling on her own for a while now. Liking attention didn't take away from any of those accomplishments. In particular, liking attention from a man didn't take away from the fact that she could live alone with absolutely no problem.

Wanting attention and love are genderless desires. Those wants weren't indicative of a pathetic person. They were natural, human cravings. There were other people who liked being alone. That was fine too. Neither positions towards romance gave an individual more or less of a pedigree. If Aoi wanted a lover, she wasn't going to fault herself for it. Denying herself the inconvenient truth about herself was just going to hurt her in the long run.

Like the protagonist in her favourite picture book, she only cried whenever she pretended that she liked being alone.

In her pursuit of a smile, she made poor decisions. She fell in love with her *dream man*: strong, sexy, and cool-headed Yusaku. She didn't know him personally very well, but she knew enough about him that paved the way for an emotional attachment. He was Playmaker. He was a hero, an icon, and an irresistibly perfect candidate for the picture perfect image in her head. Aoi fell in love with the *idea* of him, but in her selfish naivety, she couldn't differentiate the man in her head from the man in front of her. Yet when she was finally able to, she had given so much of herself to him that she couldn't help but want him anyway.

And so marked the start of the end.

Because she was blindly led by her desire, Aoi pardoned every abusive flick. Well, it went without saying that Yusaku wasn't the most respectful towards her. However, Aoi wasn't innocent in their toxic relationship either.

Yusaku wasn't a monster at all - Aoi was the one who promoted his monstrous behaviour by trying to force him to be someone that he wasn't. Yusaku didn't want her? That didn't matter. Aoi tried and tried, chasing him until he had nowhere to run. Cornered, Yusaku instinctively bit back in an effort to defend whatever darkness he felt should never be unleashed.

Yusaku didn't want her around after messing around? Aoi made it seem like she was fine with it until she lashed out at him later.

Yusaku didn't love her? Aoi kept pushing notions of love onto him anyway.

Yusaku didn't want their baby? Aoi shut him out completely, guilting him into at least pretending that he was fine with a *mass of cells* growing inside her.

She never wanted him to be involved, *not really*. Aoi wanted what she wanted, and Yusaku was supposed to just tag along for the ride. The whole situation should have been nipped from the bud if it wasn't for her persistence. Yusaku warned her that he didn't want to be in a serious relationship. Why didn't she listen?

Tears glided down her cheeks and crashed into a thousand particles on top of her hands. Thinking about Yusaku brought up so much emotion in her that her heart felt like it could burst from sentimentality. What they had been through felt surreal. To fall in love with someone who didn't love her back, then to carry his child and lose it... She couldn't believe that it was actually, at one point, *her life;* whether she wanted to admit it or not, her romantic stint with Yusaku and her subsequent pregnancy was always going to affect her. Some days might hurt less than others, and she might even delude herself into forgetting about it! But it would always come back to her in fragments because those shards were still lodged inside of her.

Her hatred for Yusaku was dissolving quickly. She was bitter towards him for not being around for her when she needed him most, but he had warned her many times before the incident that he was emotionally unavailable. So really, she couldn't pin her anger on him. He had given her ample time to

back out. The way Aoi saw it, she could only blame herself. She made the decision to go after him.

She was responsible. It was her life dictated by her choices. If she wasn't happy with the outcome, then it was also up to her to climb out of her self-manufactured rut. While she felt shame, she was also comforted by this fact. It meant that she had the power to change her future.

'Aoi.'

Upon hearing her stepbrother's voice from behind her, Aoi quickly wiped her eyes and stood up. 'Onii-sama.' she returned as she swivelled around to greet him. 'Are you finished with your call?'

'Yes.' he nodded. 'Sorry about that. I couldn't-'

'It's fine. You don't need to explain yourself.'

'But-'

'We don't have to be together twenty-four-seven.' she smiled. 'Really. I'm just happy we're spending time together.'

Akira had no choice but to take Aoi's word for it. He suggested that they go for dinner, to which Aoi agreed. The older step sibling tried to then talk to his junior, but when it was clear that Aoi only wanted to be left alone to her thoughts, Akira sighed and said he would go to the room to do work. He didn't take it personally. It was evident that Aoi needed time not only away from Den City, but to be with herself. Akira was frustrated that she wasn't opening up to him, but he knew very well that his lack of emotional involvement in her earlier years was to blame. Why *should* Aoi talk to him about being in love? Losing a baby? Being heartbroken?

Akira knew his place. He hadn't yet earned his place by Aoi's side. He would always be her caretaker and brother - nothing could take those titles away from him. However, it was unreasonable to demand her to open up to him when his actions warranted nothing less than being shut out.

Truthfully, most of the Zaizens' vacation was spent with the siblings apart.

They spent breakfast and dinner together every single day, just like they did at home. But Akira was busy with work, and Aoi was content to just wander around by herself. The moments when Akira was free and tried to connect with Aoi were futile. He tried his best to initiate contact, but Aoi rebuffed all his efforts. Left with no choice, Akira went back to his work duties over the phone and Aoi was lost in her thoughts.

Yusaku.

Their lost baby.

Her forever-changed body.

Aoi thought about these three things in an endless loop in her head.

She thought about them until she had come to peace with her heartaches.

Takeru Homura called her frequently. Every other day, maybe. He'd send her texts too, asking if she was alive and well. She would reply a curt *yes* but would never expand further.

Aoi appreciated Takeru, but his connection to Yusaku made her wary of getting involved.

But when her bitterness towards Yusaku faded away, she decided to give Takeru a call. Aoi was generally a nervous person, but when she called him, she felt no anxiety whatsoever. Takeru picked up and they made small talk, until Aoi asked about Yusaku.

'Takeru-kun, how's Yusaku.'

'He's fine.' he laughed. 'Just peachy. Always scowling, as usual, but he's fine.'

'I see...'

'Why are you asking?'

'Because I think about him a lot.' she admitted softly. 'I think about how badly we both messed up, and how miserable we made each other.'

Takeru swallowed a hard lump in his throat. His feelings for Aoi haven't really left, and it was difficult for him to hear the girl he liked talking about another man, let alone his closest friend. Even so, Takeru prided himself on being a good friend. Now was a great opportunity to begin the healing between Yusaku and Aoi. Takeru would be damned if he let this chance pass. 'He misses you too.'

'I never said I missed him.' Aoi corrected sharply. 'I don't miss feeling like shit every day.'

'Ha... Well-'

'I don't miss seeing his sad eyes.'

Takeru sighed. 'You know how he is. It's not personal. He's just...'

'I know. Don't explain.' she tried her best to sound conciliatory. 'It's just... I want him to be happy. I really, truly, want that for him.'

There was a long pause on Takeru's end of the line. He took a deep breath in before answering, 'You can make him happy.'

'No. Only he can do that for himself. Just like I have to do it for myself.'

Today, Den City High School was ringing in a new academic year.

It was safe to assume that most of the student body grudgingly dragged their feet to campus that morning. One of these unwilling students was Yusaku, who had actually enjoyed his summer vacation. It was mostly spent alone with Ai or together with Takeru, but he valued those irreplaceable moments with his friends. Hence, despite his reclusive nature, Yusaku had a

decent summer. However, it was by no means the *perfect* summer, considering that a looming incompletion nipped at his conscience.

He missed Aoi a lot.

That much was impossible to hide.

In a way, he was glad that classes were finally starting. According to Takeru, Aoi was going to continue attending the same high school. Therefore, if they were both hovering around the same campus, Yusaku and Aoi were likely to bump into each other. Yusaku shouldn't have been too excited about this prospect, but he couldn't contain the bubbling thrill lifting him off his feet as he sauntered along the walkway to the main building. He was also frightened by the notion of crossing paths with her again, but at this point, he just wanted to see her again.

How was she doing?

Was she well?

He needed to know.

And he didn't have to wait long, considering that Aoi was right behind him. The poor girl had been trailing behind him for a couple of minutes, wondering if she should overtake him or not. With her newfound outlook on their relationship, she wasn't confident to be seen by him just yet. Moreover, she wasn't confident that she would necessarily be able to handle it. If she walked right by Yusaku and he greeted her, she didn't think that she could sustain a conversation with him. Now, if he ignored her, then the weight of their dead bond would threaten to crush and she knew for sure that she would have to run to the bathroom to have a good cry.

Aoi no longer wanted to pursue anything with him, but her feelings for him were still heavy.

Woman up, she scolded herself, *Stop avoiding the new reality.*

Inhaling a sharp gust of air, Aoi steeled herself and walked right ahead of Yusaku.

From his peripheral, Yusaku caught sight of his former lover the second she was by him. He watched her spear forward, so he knew that he shouldn't call her attention. It couldn't be clearer that Aoi didn't want to speak to him. Besides, she had told him that she wanted to be left alone. Nevertheless, he truly wondered how she was doing. Surely, a simple question wasn't overstepping the boundaries she had set up?

He didn't have to hold her or carry a conversation. Yusaku just wanted to see if she was well.

But they were her boundaries and he wasn't going to disrespect her again.

This was their new reality.

'Zaizen-san!'

Aoi looked to her left, in the direction of the voice that had called out to her. Hazel eyes widened and she grinned. The person who greeted her was none other than Takeru Homura: a person she had actually missed terribly. He was also kind to her, and for that, she would never be able fully express her gratitude. Despite not knowing the details of her relationship with Yusaku, he had served as a lamp for her during dark times.

'Takeru-kun. How was your summer?'

'Great!' he beamed. 'I spent most of it in the city with Yusaku! You should have been here with us!' he added the last bit cheekily, hoping that Aoi would catch the line and be more open to seeing Yusaku again. Takeru wanted both of his friends to be happy together, and he had no shame in pursuing this goal.

'I'm glad you had fun.' Aoi replied tightly with a deceptively sweet smile on her face. 'Well then, I better get to class.'

'Right. I should too.'

'Mhmm...'

'Zaizen-san?'

'Yes?'

'I think you and Yusaku would be a good couple.' he blurted. 'I don't know what happened between you two, but... It's obvious that you guys still have feelings for each other. I just don't get why it's so hard to be together.'

'We were a horrible couple.' Aoi laughed wholeheartedly. 'Terrible. The worst.'

'The worst?'

'*The worst*.' she emphasised. 'And the feelings I have for him aren't the same as the feelings he has for me.'

'What do you mean?'

'It doesn't matter. Because those feelings will fade in time, and everyone will move on. Actually, I feel like we've both moved on already.'

Yusaku hasn't! Takeru wanted to say, but he held his tongue. He had already been too crass in his approach anyway. At this point, he was just embarrassed. Both Yusaku and Aoi had shown less enthusiasm than he had during this entire ordeal. Takeru was starting to question the point of all of this. Maybe it really was hopeless. Perhaps Yusaku and Aoi weren't meant to be together. Takeru didn't understand it, but he really didn't have to. He wasn't involved, and if both parties had to come to an agreement to stay away from each other, then what could he do about it?

'Don't worry, Takeru-kun. We're still friends.'

'Yeah, but...' he shook his head. 'You and Yusaku aren't.'

'Maybe we're not meant to be.' Aoi paused. 'And maybe that's better for both him and me.'

Thanks to all those supporting this story! After publishing last chapter, a lot of worries have left me regarding this story. I wasn't confident about my characterisation of Yusaku, but I'm glad that the reception didn't underline any disappointment so far in his portrayal.

Not a lot happened in this chapter plot-wise, but I wanted to set up the characters for their new journey. Last chapter focused on Yusaku's feelings, so I wanted to have this chapter delve into Aoi's thought processes. I promise that next chapter will have a lot of character interaction. I hope that you enjoyed this chapter regardless!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below!

To all the Guests who read and review this story, thank you!

Yujo0147, thank you for your continued encouragement! I hope this chapter has shed some light on Aoi's state.

Aniki, thank you for the continued support! That will most definitely happen and I hope that you enjoy the future chapters!

38. Sultry

'Zaizen-san, do you want to have lunch with Yusaku and me today?'

Aoi quirked a brow at Takeru, who she had run into in the hallway on her way to class. Weeks had passed since the beginning of the semester, and she was doing a fantastic job of avoiding Yusaku. However, this also meant that she had to keep her distance from Takeru, who was usually with Yusaku anyway. She felt bad for being indirectly punitive. After all, Takeru was the only person who had successfully checked up on her when she was down. He was the only one who she felt comfortable around when she was going through tough times and for that, she was always going to be grateful to him.

She missed their friendship. It was the only real, healthy relationship she had in light of her life's recent events. While Akira loved her, he hadn't given her space or the respect she wanted. On the other hand, these requirements came naturally to Takeru. He only ever spoke to her to ask how she was doing, and not once did he snap at her for whatever reason. Takeru genuinely cared about her wellbeing. It touched Aoi's frosty heart.

So even though, *no*, Aoi didn't want to have lunch with Takeru *and* Yusaku, she felt as if she owed it to the former to invest her time to.

'I'd like to hang out with you sometime.' Aoi said tightly. 'But just you.'

'Oh...' he murmured, clearly disappointed. His brows knit sadly. It appeared as if Aoi really didn't want to see Yusaku any time soon. Takeru considered asking why, but decided that it wasn't helpful to delve into matters that didn't concern him. Especially considering that talking about it only seemed to make both Yusaku and Aoi upset.

Besides, why was he so insistent in the first place?

Because he wanted Yusaku to be happy. And Aoi too.

But it was clear at this point that being together was the last thing those two wanted.

Takeru was the only one perpetuating the notion of a romantic relationship, regurgitating demons that perhaps were better left buried in the dirt.

Was it time to give this all a rest?

Takeru didn't have the answer to all these questions swirling around in his head, so he gave Aoi a low, 'We'll talk about it,' before hurrying off to his first class of the day.

He always had a hard time concentrating during lectures, mainly because he hardly attended school. In actuality, he only attended a little over half the total number of school days in a semester all throughout high school. Back then, his soul was stuck in the recesses of his trauma, so the last thing he wanted or needed was to be around a bunch of people who didn't understand him.

Bottomline, he wasn't very good at paying attention to his teachers. Today was no exception, but it was a reason entirely other than his short attention span. His mind was stuck on Aoi. Specifically, on Aoi's relationship with Yusaku. Takeru tried to see it from Aoi's perspective, despite the minimal (non-existent) history he had gathered. Unlike Yusaku, Aoi failed at pulling off a proper poker face. Although she tried to mask her true feelings, Takeru could clearly see pain and bitterness etched onto her features. Yusaku was unreadable, but Aoi's candid reactions to certain topics provided some clues here and there.

How did Yusaku feel?

Takeru was done playing it by ear. He decided that he was going to confront his friend about it at lunch. Surely, Yusaku wouldn't be offended. *Surely*, Yusaku was willing to reconcile with Aoi. Well, to be fair, Yusaku was easier to speak to than Aoi because he was simply willing to have a conversation. As to the depth of it, Takeru was going to have to take a rest.

It was better than approaching Aoi again as she just swatted every attempt to pry into her personal life.

The bell rang, marking the start of the lunch hour. Takeru beelined out of the building. He needed to speak to Yusaku immediately. There were just too many uncertainties in his heart. In fact, Takeru was questioning why he was even doing this. As soon as he spotted Yusaku already seated at their usual meeting place, he sighed in relief as if somehow, Yusaku wouldn't have made it today. Wasting no time, Takeru sat down in front of his comrade and relayed the brief story on his encounter with Aoi earlier in the day.

'You should see her.' Yusaku said flatly. 'She's your friend, right?'

Takeru winced. 'Yeah... But the reason I asked to hang out with her in the first place was so that I'd have an excuse to string her along with us for lunch.'

'And you didn't think to ask me beforehand if I'd be fine with that?

'Aren't you?'

'Who knows.' ominously vibrant emeralds narrowed. A dark chill went up Takeru's spine. Generally, Yusaku's sharp features and steely disposition rendered him an unfriendly personality to deal with. His presentation, combined with the defensive passion bubbling beneath his skin whenever a situation involving Aoi popped up, showcased a Yusaku that was past the point of intimidating.

Right now, he was just *fucking terrifying*.

'I know you want her in your life.' Takeru blurted bravely. 'I want that for you too.'

'What I want is for Aoi to be happy.'

'She wants *you* to be happy.'

'I can't remember the last time I actually was.' Yusaku bit out icily. 'Do you think I was happy after the Hanoi perished? My mission was fulfilled, but my life was the same. Inside, I was able to gain closure for my past. But the truth is, I still live in my own self-manufactured abyss wherein no light bleeds. I'm *still* that way. Even though I'm a hero, even though I have your friendship, even though I have Ai...' he paused. Then, 'I'm still miserable. I can't help it. It's who I am.'

'Yusaku...'

'What Aoi needs is for me to be as far away from her as possible. I'm poisonous to her.'

'Don't be ridiculous!'

'I dragged her into my abyss.'

'Aoi's a woman!' Takeru snapped, brows knitting together furiously. 'She's her own person! You can't drag her into anything... She made the decision to be involved with you, to stick it out with whatever happened between you guys! You can't be faulted for that. She wanted you as you were! I don't know what went down, but barring all the messed up things I'm sure happened, Aoi chose to like you!'

'She liked the idea of me. When she found out that I wasn't who she thought I was, she was sorely disappointed.'

'Did she leave?'

Yusaku thought about it. Shocked by his own realisation of the answer, he replied, 'No.'

'*See*! Alright, maybe you weren't prince charming... But she still liked you for what she discovered you really were. Her feelings for you were still real.'

Defeated, Yusaku could do nothing but rub his temples as he let out a long sigh. He didn't think that it was possible to love and appreciate Aoi more than he already did inside, but Takeru's words placed a spotlight on Aoi's resilient heart. It was true. Maybe he didn't live up to her expectations, but she wanted him anyway. She wanted his baby, and she somehow believed that he would be a worthy father. She had placed so much blind trust in him that he couldn't help but feel his heart swell at the revelation that she loved him unconditionally. By no means was she perfect (or realistic in her ideology) but her willingness to love shamelessly underlined just how beautifully human she was.

Beautifully human.

For all her faults and naivety, Aoi was beautifully human.

'You speak so highly of her.' Yusaku spoke softly. 'It would make her happy to hear you.'

'Don't change the subject.'

'Listen.' his tone turned strict. 'I know what you're doing. I appreciate it, really. But stop.'

'But-'

'*Stop*.' Yusaku raised a finger as a warning. 'I don't want to hear it anymore.'

'So that's it?' Takeru demanded angrily. 'You're just going to give up on someone you care about?!'

'Do you think it's easy for me to stay away from her?'

'It certainly came naturally to you before.'

'It didn't.' Yusaku grit his teeth. Takeru was provoking him and he was trying hard not to bite, but it was challenging when it felt as if the whole world was reminding him of how terrible a lover he was. *Yes*, he got it: He

mistreated Aoi. He hurt her terribly and he could never make up for it. Knowing this, why on earth would Takeru insist on them getting back together?

Because he doesn't know the full story.

'You think she wants me back?' Yusaku challenged. 'You're wrong. Aoi wants nothing to do with me.'

'I already know that.' Takeru's shoulders slumped, defeated. 'It just feels so wrong. When we all used to hang out, I saw the way you guys looked at each other. Like when Zaizen-san and I would talk, but she'd always look over to see if you were staring at her.'

Yusaku's heart sank. Takeru knew? Takeru liked her, knew, and didn't say anything?

'Aoi doesn't need me.' Yusaku said gently. 'Having said that, just because she and I don't talk anymore, doesn't mean that you shouldn't be her friend.'

'I can't hurt you like that.'

'It won't hurt me. I'll be glad, actually.' he smiled with uncharacteristic warmth. 'If you can be the person Aoi can rely on.'

'Shouldn't that be you?'

'No. I'm incapable.'

'You're not-'

'Go hang out with her.' Yusaku interrupted, clearly hellbent on moving on from this topic. 'Bring her flowers. She'd like that.'

Takeru jolted in his seat. The implication made him sick to his stomach. The last thing he wanted was to compete with Yusaku. Not only was that going to create conflict with his dear friend, but he simply knew he wasn't going to win. 'Because you used to send her flowers?'

'No. Because she likes them.'

Aoi was miffed that Takeru didn't give her an enthusiastic *yes!* when she suggested that they get together sometime.

Actually, she was offended. Considering that Takeru had practically been hounding her all week, she thought that he'd be ecstatic to receive an invitation from her. This bothered Aoi for the rest of the day until she arrived back home. She adored Takeru as a person, hence the idea of becoming his friend was alluring. But if his reaction earlier was anything to go by, she could safely conclude that he wasn't very excited to spark a friendship with her.

Before Aoi could get (even more) ahead of herself, her cellphone buzzed. She reached into her breast pocket, eyes widening when she saw that Takeru had sent her message.

Hi! Zaizen-san! When can I see you? :D

Aoi smiled. Takeru's message immediately placated her. Her heart swelled and a smile graced her lips. The quiet girl herself was unaware of how happy Takeru made her, but she enjoyed the feeling of satisfaction nonetheless.

She wanted Takeru to spend time with her, and it seemed that he was willing.

She wanted his attention.

She got it.

Best of all, she didn't have to beg for it.

Aoi bit her lip and began typing up a response. Overcome with elation, she hastily replied that he was welcome to visit her at home today, *now* - as soon as possible. On his end of the conversation, Takeru was freaking out.

He wanted to see Aoi more so than she wanted to see him, but he at least wanted to look presentable or... *special*. This wasn't enough time to prepare himself to look-

Takeru froze.

Why did he care about what Aoi thought of him physically?

I still like her, he lamented to himself. *How is this right? Going to see my best friend's ex, who I have feelings for...*

But both Yusaku and Aoi were clear about being over each other. Their relationship was dead and they had intentions of reviving it. Why should Takeru feel guilty? At this point, it was only him who was explicitly making a big deal out of everything. Why should be dramatic about a non-existent issue? It's not like it was ever *his* relationship.

Fuck it, he thought before marching over to the Zaizens' residence, stopping by a flower shop on the way.

When he got to the luxury apartment complex wherein Aoi stayed, she buzzed him up quickly. In the elevator, Takeru adjusted his school uniform, as if it was going to make an impactful difference on Aoi's perception of him. He was carrying a bouquet of red roses in his arms. Yusaku mentioned that Aoi would have liked to receive a floral arrangement, and Takeru thought that it wouldn't hurt to indulge her.

The elevator doors pinged open. 'Good evening,' the robot maid greeted him. It then guided him towards the staircase, where Aoi was descending. His eyes met hers, and both classmates smiled at the sight of the other. To say that they had missed each other's company was an understatement. Aoi was finally reunited with one of the most supportive people she's ever met, and Takeru was able to get quality alone-time with the woman he fantasised about.

'Good evening, Takeru-kun.'

'Y-Yeah, good evening!'

'What are those?' she asked as she pointed to the bouquet her visitor was holding.

'Oh...' Takeru's attention turned to the red roses in his arms, which he had almost forgotten about. Whenever he was around Aoi, the rest of his surroundings seemed to fade away so that she was the sole focus in his mind's eye. He blushed. Maybe bringing her flowers wasn't such a good idea after all. Was this weird? Or creepy? *Desperate*?

'Takeru-kun?'

'They're for you.' he announced quickly, thrusting them forwards and bowing his head. The shy student couldn't handle seeing Aoi's reaction. It was taking all of his courage at this moment just to admit that he had brought her a present.

'Thank you.' she smiled as she took them from him. 'I love them.'

'Ah... Good.' Takeru laughed awkwardly, a hand gravitating to the back of his head in embarrassment. Aoi saying that she liked his gift made his heart flutter.

'Do you want to come up to my room?'

'Sure.'

The pair made their way to Aoi's bedroom. As soon as they were inside, she shut the door and placed the bouquet on top of her desk. She made a mental note to place the roses in a vase after Takeru left. It didn't take long for Takeru to make himself comfortable. He sat down on a chair, until Aoi beckoned him over to sit with her on her bed. The proposal made Takeru unexpectedly nervous, but he knew that Aoi didn't at all mean to be suggestive. It was simply more casual to lounge with each other on top of the mattress.

At first, they sat right next to each other. Aoi then decided that she was exhausted from school, and laid down with her back to the sheets. Takeru didn't know what to do until Aoi motioned for him to do the same. He was hesitant at first, but thought that making it a bigger deal was just going to render the situation awkward. Thus, he too lay next to her. He was so close to her that he could smell the faintly sweet perfume that he never noticed on her before.

'I'm so glad you're here.' she beamed. 'I missed you.'

'I missed you too.' Takeru smiled warmly. Lavender eyes softened, and he swore that he was seeing stars. Aoi was carelessly loving. She spoke her mind freely, and she had a lot of love in her heart. Takeru admired this about her. She was the only person he knew who had a profoundly open approach to loving others, especially considering that society at large was almost ashamed of explicit connections between people. Unlike most of the student body, who were reserved despite being generally friendly, Aoi was cold to those she didn't know and wonderfully welcoming to those she held dear in her heart.

Aoi spoke, 'I was worried, you know... That you wouldn't see me because Yusaku and I aren't speaking.'

'Well... What happens between you and Yusaku stays with you guys. You and I have our own separate relationship.'

'I'm glad you feel that way.'

'But while we're on the topic...'

'Oh, no-'

'Yusaku really loves-'

'I don't want to talk about it.' Aoi cut him off sternly. 'Really. I don't want to go there.'

'But why? You liked him at one point, didn't you?'

'In the past.'

'If it's truly in the past, then what's preventing you from even talking about it in the present?'

'Because I want to keep it in the past.' she tucked a lock of hair behind an ear - a nervous tick of hers whenever she was pushed into a corner. She tried not to take Takeru's inquisitiveness against him, for she knew he had a heart of gold. However, the topic was unnerving and she could barely keep herself from crying out in frustration. 'It was a difficult...' *relationship*? no, 'time in my life.' she settled. 'I don't like reliving how I felt back then.'

'How you felt?'

'Unwanted.' Aoi admitted. 'Disposable. I don't know.' she paused. 'He was just... *so cold*.'

'Please don't take his coldness against him. That's just his exterior. He's a really good guy, the best I've ever known...' Takeru swallowed. His eyes glazed over with what may have been nostalgia laced with repressed despair. Everyone involved in the Lost Incident had a rough time, but Yusaku may have been the one who took it most to heart. It completely derailed his life, and he had absolutely no support system to bounce back on. 'Him being cold doesn't mean he doesn't care for you.'

'I don't want that kind of care.' her voice softened to barely a whisper. 'That's not satisfying. Unsatisfying love just leads to hatred. I want someone to show me how much I mean to them... Like how you did.'

Takeru batted his eyes, hoping to clear what he perceived to be his groggy mind. What did Aoi just say? What was she insinuating? Aoi's words were meant to speak candidly about their friendship, but from his rose-tinted glasses, Takeru took her meaning to be deeper.

'You checked up on me all the time. You didn't know what I was going through, but you cared for me anyway. It was nice. If it wasn't for you, I would have felt completely unloved.' she smiled as she reached over to take his hand in hers. 'You made me happy.'

Takeru's gaze on Aoi intensified. Her words, coupled with the the feel of her hand on his, set a fire in his heart. The embers escaped him, for he let his guard down for a second to hint at what he wanted. Impulsively, his eyes darted momentarily to her lips, but not before Aoi caught sight of it. This sparked an idea in her: a possibility that she was all too glad to entertain.

Aoi closed the distance between them so that their lips met.

By then, Takeru's inhibitions flew out the window. All the back-and-forth in his head about being a good friend versus seizing the moment were suspended in liminality. His hands, guided only by the desire to indulge in his own wants, snaked to Aoi's waist. He caressed her sides, shamelessly hoping to excite her into giving him more than a conservative kiss. It worked - she opened her mouth to him and their tongues sent bolts of electricity up and down their spines as they came together. She climbed on top of him and clearly caught dominance; biting him whenever he was too eager, and whimpering when he was too reserved. Takeru was more than willing to follow her cues. As long as he could be with her, he was willing to bend over backwards.

It was nice.

Aoi felt her companion's resolve to please her, and she was silently celebrating being prioritised by someone she cared about. It wasn't like she was unattracted to Takeru. He was a good person, and she thought he was handsome. While it was true that he didn't make her heart race or her legs weak like Yusaku did, the change in chemistry was inviting. Takeru wasn't cruel. He was kind and easy to be around. She was comfortable.

Too comfortable by now, maybe.

Thank you to everyone reading and supporting this story!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise I do so below.

To all the Guests, thank you for your review!

Yujo0147, thank you for your continued encouragement and insightful reviews! There is doubt in both Yusaku and Aoi because they do still have feelings for each other as well as unresolved issues, causing them to question whether moving on is really the right thing to do. However, at this stage, they both feel as if it is the only option left.

Aniki, thank you for your continued support and insightful reviews! There will indeed be a timeskip later on in this story.

39. Welcome Home

Takeru couldn't believe what he had done.

Did last night really happen or did he just dream all of that up? Had he really kissed Aoi Zaizen? Were their bodies really pressed against each other? How certain could he be that Aoi genuinely wanted to do that with him, or perhaps she had only felt sorry for him because his crush on her was painfully obvious to this day? The way they had part was beyond embarrassing, with Aoi ending their session by saying that she could feel him *tense down below* and that she was unwilling to go further. Did she think he was a pervert?

He was going mad with all these unanswered questions gnawing at his brain.

'Good morning, Takeru-kun.'

He practically jumped out of his skin as he swivelled around to come face-to-face with the person who had just called his name. 'Zaizen-san!' he chuckled a little too loudly. 'Good morning!'

'How are you?' Aoi asked cooly, as if they weren't making out this past evening. 'Did you sleep well?'

'I slept fine.' he cleared his throat. 'Just fine.'

This was a weird encounter.

How could Aoi be so casual towards him this morning? Shouldn't they talk about what happened? Did Aoi not feel as anxious as he did about the whole scenario? Regardless, it wasn't like Takeru could just brush off what had happened between them. The truth was that he had been up all night thinking about it, berating himself for being intimate with someone who should have been off-limits. Takeru didn't mean to come across as aloof, but he was having a hard time gauging the situation. How should he act? He was lost.

However, Aoi took his distant attitude as rejection. She was aware of the signs: a sudden coldness, an unwillingness to interact with her. Aoi wasn't about to be brushed aside again. Last night, she had kissed Takeru because she felt a connection with him. It was as if, as she confessed to how much he meant to her, his image in front of her lit up and all she wanted to do was be with him. To her joy, he reciprocated her kiss and there was evidence later on that he was more attracted to her than he had let on. That was when she stopped their session. She simply wasn't ready to jump into another sexual relationship.

Was he disappointed? Is that why he wasn't his usual, bubbly self?

Aoi didn't want to stick around to find out.

'Alright then.' she snipped and turned on her heel. 'I'll see you around.'

'Wait!' Takeru grabbed her by the hand. She turned around to face him, anger etched onto her normally serene features. *What*? What was going on now, with this hot-and-cold technique? She had been through this method of mental manipulation before and she wasn't about to play into it again.

'What do you want?'

'Shouldn't we talk?' he pressed. 'About last night?'

Aoi tilted her head, confused. 'What do you mean?'

'We... We did stuff.' he said quickly as his cheeks tinged pink. 'I think we should talk about that... Don't you?'

Aoi's anger dissipated quickly. She barely held in a sigh of relief. So Takeru wasn't pushing her away - he was just nervous, sort of like how she was after her first time with Yusaku. How terrible of her to assume the worst. The pressure that had been building in her heart whittled away so that she could relax. Takeru wasn't like Yusaku. *Takeru wasn't Yusaku*. She had to remember that.

'Let's talk.' Aoi nodded. She hoped to sound open. The last thing she wanted was for Takeru to be uncomfortable around her. She knew all too well what it was like to feel odd about intimacy, especially if it was with someone who was unpleasant about it. For his sake, she vowed to be willing to work through any issues he may have with her. She strongly believed that no matter how casual, when two people came together in intimacy, they owed it to each other to be understanding and compassionate to whatever emotional turmoil had arisen from the act.

'Why did you kiss me?'

'Because I wanted to, of course.'

'But *why*?' his tone and turned near-pleading. His hands balled into fists at his sides, trembling with threatening emotion. Though he was still contained, he was only barely so. 'Why me? What if it was someone else with you last night, would you have-'

'No, I-'

'You don't like me.' he blurted. 'You said you don't, so-'

'Back when you asked me, I didn't. It wasn't personal. I couldn't like anyone.' she admitted as her voice quieted. 'I wasn't in the right head space to. There were other things on my mind.'

'So... Why...?'

'Last night, when I was telling you how much I appreciated you...' she reached out to brush her fingertips along his arm, sending tantalizing bolts of electricity up his spine. 'I sort of realized how much I enjoy you. It was like I woke up to a different way of looking at you.'

'I don't get it. Makes no sense to me.' Takeru said sharply. His tone turned stern, surprising Aoi. She had always known Takeru to be impeccably polite, so to hear him don a stricter personality was daunting. Nevertheless, she wasn't going to tuck her tail and run away. If Takeru was upset, she was

going to take the brunt of it. If it so happened that she caused him pain, she wanted to relieve him of all of it.

'What makes no sense? I can explain everything.'

'I just don't get the entire premise of your so-called feelings. You said you didn't like me.' he pressed. 'Then out of nowhere, last night, you decide to kiss me.'

'That's-'

'Screw this whole thing about seeing me in a different light or whatever.' he frowned. 'Do you like me or not? Did last night mean anything to you? Or...' his eyes darkened in an intimidating effort to conceal vulnerability. 'Were you using me?'

'I would never use you.' Aoi replied honestly. 'I know what it's like to be used and tossed aside.'

Takeru's heart fell. The implication in Aoi's words were not lost on him. For the first time, he got a glimpse of what the problematic relationship between Yusaku and Aoi was like. Although it was but a broken shard of a larger picture, Takeru clearly heard the pain etched onto Aoi's confession.

'Oh.' he was sheepish. 'I'm sorry. I didn't-'

'It's fine. You have a right to be angry. I was confusing to you, wasn't I?'

'No, I just assumed... I shouldn't have.'

'Like I said, it's fine.' she laughed. 'Are we good?'

'We never weren't.' Takeru cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry. My emotions-'

'You really don't need to say anything. I understand.'

'I'm sorry.' he whispered anyway. 'I don't like getting upset with you. It's just...' he swallowed. 'I like you a lot, and maybe that means I can't do that

type of thing with you if it's meaningless.'

'It wasn't meaningless.'

'What did it mean to you, then?'

'Mm...' she tilted her head as if in thought. She tried to put her raw thoughts into better words, but ultimately decided to speak from the heart. Though it may not be entirely clear, her uncut feelings would be the most honest - and fair - way of answering Takeru. 'In that moment, I wanted you to be mine. I kissed you to show you just how special you are to me, not just as another human being, but as a man.'

'So you like me.'

'Yes.' she giggled sweetly. 'I do.'

'Do you like me for me?' his voice was small. 'And not because you want to get over-'

'Not at all. I won't look back. I can only see what's in front of me now.' she reached up to cup his face tenderly. Takeru's heart swelled at the contact, but what he was entirely unprepared for was the sincerity in her eyes. He realized that Aoi Zaizen was someone who felt strongly about everything. She experienced the world around her with a shameless, guard less desire to feel, to love, and to be loved back. This flavour for sentimentality, combined with her brave openness, rendered her all the more alluring to him.

'Aoi... Did you love him?'

'Yes.'

Takeru's heart sank.

'But that was in the past.' Aoi insisted. 'I want something different for myself: something pure and satisfying. Let's take it slow...' she whispered

against his lips. 'See where it goes...'

Takeru closed the nearly negligible distance between them so that their lips met. His hands found their way to her waist so that he could pull her closer. Her familiar warmth comforted him, although he was nervous being so intimate with her. Up until this point, Aoi had felt completely unattainable to him - that maybe last night was a blip. But to actually hold and kiss her: it was indescribably satisfying. Sure, he was still worried about Yusaku. What would he tell him? How would he feel?

And yet, at this moment in time, Takeru couldn't find it in himself to push Aoi away.

Ever since Takeru supposedly *just hung out* with Aoi, he had been acting strange all week.

Yusaku's observation wasn't made in haste. Even though he was personally invested in the relationship between Takeru and Aoi, Yusaku still used logic to come to the conclusion that something was off with the flame-themed duelist. For example, Takeru's smile was usually wide and full of genuine cheeriness, but lately, his expression was perpetually laced with worry. Yusaku asked him if something was bothering him, only for Takeru to stammer a half-assed excuse and shake his head. Yusaku already suspected that something controversial must have happened when Takeru met Aoi, but he decided not to investigate considering that it was none of his business.

Plus, he didn't really want to know.

By the beginning of the new week, Yusaku had resigned to the possibility that he may never know what transpired between them. Imagine his surprise when, by the end of the week and during their lunch hour, Takeru took announced that he had something to say. This piqued Yusaku's fear. It was rare for Takeru to feel the need to give him any warning before any declaration. One could only assume that Takeru was preparing Yusaku for bad news. After all, if the information to be relayed was positive, what need was there to preface it with a warning?

'I have something to tell you.'

'Say it.' Yusaku steeled himself. 'Go ahead.'

Make it fast. Like ripping off a bandaid.

'We kissed.'

Yusaku's jaw dropped.

What?

What did Takeru just say?

Yusaku anticipated a confession revealing an event that was less explicit than a straight-up kiss. Perhaps Takeru had told Aoi that he had feelings for her, or vice versa. Maybe Aoi had revealed to Takeru all the crap that she went through, painting Yusaku in an incredibly terrible light to a friend he wanted to keep by his side. Taking into account how hesitant Takeru was about pursuing a romantic rendezvous with Aoi, Yusaku didn't think that they would kiss, at least not so soon.

He was shocked.

That was all there was to it.

And hurt.

He felt betrayed - by *both* Takeru and Aoi.

But he wasn't about to let anyone in on that.

'How was it?' Yusaku asked cooly. 'Are you guys dating now?'

Takeru blushed. 'Uh... Yeah.'

'How did that happen?' Yusaku cleared his throat, desperately clinging onto self-restrain. His blood was boiling, rushing to fill his skill. His ears felt so

hot, he felt as if his brain could melt. A bubbling urge to break the bench in front of him was becoming harder to keep at bay. While Takeru hadn't really done anything wrong, Yusaku also wanted to bite his head off. Yusaku was beyond angry. He was *pissed off*. The idea of Aoi being with someone else cut him deeper than he anticipated.

If you fucked her in front of me, I wouldn't care.

Yusaku was now eating his words for he *most definitely cared*.

'I'm scared.' Ai squeaked.

'Me too.' Takeru admitted as he raised his palms up in surrender. 'You look like you're about to kill me.'

Yusaku then became very aware of the fact that his face was etched with fury. He forced himself to relax. The temporary peace worked for his external features, but a sharp pain in his back started at the base of his spine. By now, however, Yusaku was adept at gritting his teeth and sucking it up. The last thing he needed was for his friend to be worried because he was pining over a girl that wanted nothing to do with him.

'I'm just eager to hear more.' Yusaku lied. 'What happened after the first kiss?'

'We spoke about it the next day. I hung out at her place, and...' he winced. 'We kissed again. Then it just kept on repeating day after day until we decided that we would try dating each other.'

Yusaku grit his teeth.

'I know that you said you didn't want to know... But I couldn't hide it from you. I'm serious about Aoi.' Takeru continued, and Yusaku jolted at the fact that his friend had just referred to his former lover in a familiar fashion. 'It's not just a fling. I care about her and-'

'I already know that.' Yusaku interjected. He wasn't ready to hear more. It was too upsetting. 'Like I said before, you'll be a good fit for her.'

'Well... I know you liked each other, so I wanted to know if you had any ill feelings about this.'

'I don't. I just...' he sighed. 'I want you both to be happy.'

'Do you think we could all hang out one day? All of us?'

'Why would you want that?'

'You're both important to me. I don't want to lose you over this.'

'You won't lose me.' Yusaku said sincerely. 'I promise.'

'But you're hurt... Aren't you?'

'Ah... No...' he was unconvincing. 'I'm happy for you, really.'

Takeru didn't entirely believe Yusaku, but didn't know how to proceed with the conversation. Yusaku already said his peace - there was nothing more for Takeru to press. Though he was anything but convincing, Yusaku was not the type of man that could be spoken to once he had given his two cents. Takeru knew this all too well. More so, he could sense his friend desperately clinging onto self-control. It would be contemptuous for Takeru to incite a negative reaction when Yusaku was doing his best to steady the metaphorical boat of their teetering friendship.

But there was one more thing Takeru needed to get off his chest.

'I'm insecure, you know... Because I know she loved you.'

Yusaku's eyes lit up. 'What?'

'I know she said she's over you, but...' Takeru sighed heavily and rubbed his face. 'I'm scared.'

'Scared?'

'To lose her to you.'

'You never will.' Yusaku's eyes fell to his folded hands atop the wooden table. 'Aoi and I can never be together again.'

'I just don't want to feel like I didn't give you guys enough time for closure before I invested all of my feelings into Aoi.'

A green gaze hardened with worry. 'What do you mean?'

'Will you talk to her? Hash things out once and for all?'

'Takeru, seriously.' he shook his head. 'Aoi won't want to talk to me.'

'I asked her. She said she was willing.'

Yusaku quirked a brow. 'What?'

'Yeah... I already mentioned this to her. I just feel that if what happened between you guys is in the past, that there's no harm in talking about it now.' Takeru explained. 'Besides, I can feel the unresolved tension in the air whenever you guys so much as pass by each other. It's...' he inhaled sharply. 'Nerve-wracking. I don't know what happened and I never want to know, but... Hey, if there's nothing to talk about, then that's fine too. If there is, you should talk to her so that you can both move on cleanly from each other. I want to give you both that space.'

Yusaku nodded. He was anxious to talk to Aoi again, but Takeru had a point. Moreover, there were so many things Yusaku wanted to tell his former lover that he never had the courage to, especially after Aoi effectively told him to stay away from her until further notice. Well, now was the signal that she was comfortable enough to speak to him again for Takeru's sake.

For Takeru's sake.

Yusaku fought the dark cloud of broken sentiment looming over him. This wasn't about getting Aoi back again primarily because it shouldn't be about what he wants. For once, he resolved to truly, wholeheartedly hand himself over to Aoi to work towards a future that she wanted. Yusaku understood that Aoi wanted to speak to him once and for all to help Takeru feel secure in what was a blossoming relationship between the couple. No matter how painful the experience was going to be, he vowed that he would power through it because he owed it to her to do so.

Yusaku wasn't one to delay the inevitable, even if he himself was frightened of it.

So when he got home that same evening, he dialled Aoi's number for the first time in months. The line rang once, twice, three times before he gave up and texted her instead. He asked her if she was willing to speak, and she replied immediately (surprisingly!) saying that she was, but that she didn't want to do so over the phone. She wanted to meet in person, and Yusaku expressed that he was willing to accommodate her request. They scheduled a time and place: tomorrow, by 3:00 pm, at Cafe Anna. Yusaku had never heard of that place before, let alone been inside it, so he wondered if that restaurant held some special meaning to Aoi.

He would find out tomorrow anyway.

The next day rolled in. Thank goodness it was a Saturday, meaning that there were no classes to attend. Yusaku hardly caught a wink of sleep last night, kept up by the anticipation of what he knew was going to be a difficult conversation. He didn't fare well with matters that required him to be vulnerable. Rather, his first reaction was to shut it down and run away. However, he was wiling to change that for Aoi. After all, it was his stubborn unwillingness to open up to her that broke her heart and prevented him from being a man that could support her when she needed him most.

It made him sick, to think that Aoi lost his baby and he did absolutely nothing to help her out of her emotional rut.

Too late for regrets now, he supposed.

The hours went by slowly, but 3:00 eventually came. By then, Yusaku was already seated at a table, where he had been for a little over half an hour. Truly, he was a sight to behold: strikingly mysterious in all black, the darkness of monotony framing the ominous jewel-green of his eyes that barely met another's gaze. He came early because he had nothing better to do, and in the hopes that he could gain some confidence if he familiarised himself with his surroundings before he had to meet with Aoi. Typically, he didn't like environments that were foreign to him, but he wasn't about to fight with Aoi over something as negligible as a meeting place.

3:01

3:03

3:09

Time ticked. It wasn't like Aoi to be late. Yusaku held his breath. Had she decided not to push through with this meeting? Did she despise him that much? A million questions were running through his mind, but a warm hand ghosting over his shoulder snapped him out of his toxic thoughts. He craned his neck to see Aoi herself, right behind him, dressed in a white shirt and blue cardigan, both of which he had seen on her before. Her nostalgic appearance nearly made his heart burst, but he managed to keep himself composed.

'Fujiki Yusaku-kun.' Aoi whispered. 'Good afternoon.'

'Hi.' his throat was unbearably dry. 'Good afternoon.'

'I got a coffee.' his eyes fell to the paper cup Aoi was holding in her hand, and only then did it occur to him that he should have ordered something. 'I was waiting in line.' she explained as she took her seat in front of him. 'Sorry about that.'

'It's fine.'

She gave him a polite smile. Large, soulfully hazel eyes bore into cold green. Even as she took a sip of her drink, her gaze never once left him. She wanted to appear confident in front of him, but the truth was that facing him again was more difficult than she anticipated. Not that she had feelings for him - but all the heartaches she felt in the past were bubbling up to the surface again. *Bittersweet*. She hated him for not being the man she wanted, but she was thankful that he let her love him at all. Yet, before today, a reunion between them was out of the question. It would only hurt. But now, they came together because of one commonality.

They both cared for Takeru.

Aoi was open to, and excited by, the prospect of being romantically involved with Takeru. On the other hand, Yusaku felt compelled to give Takeru some peace of mind. In order for both of these goals to be accomplished, they had to face each other again. Aoi had to relieve Takeru of doubts in his heart, and Yusaku had to prove that it was possible for himself and her to be cordial with one another. Before any of that could happen, all invisible demons had to be banished.

Yusaku wasn't going to beat around the bush.

He began, 'I'm sorry for everything that I've done to you, and for everything that I didn't do for you.'

Tears welled up in Aoi's eyes, but she was determined not to let them fall. Besides, it wasn't as if she wanted to cry out because of an uncontrollable urge to reconcile with Yusaku. Rather, the emotion that stung her was that of relief. She might not have believed him before, but fresh pain no longer held her back. As of now, she was exhausted from being angry at Yusaku for so long. Though she was wary of him, her resentment had long dissipated. She resolved not to be the first to bridge the gap between herself and Yusaku, but she didn't expect the latter to be so forthcoming.

'I'm sorry, Aoi.'

"Thank you. I'm sorry too, for forcing my feelings onto you.'

'Don't apologise. I *liked* that you thought I was special.' he admitted softly. 'I know that you think that I never let you in, but it was hard for me to be physical with someone else. There wasn't anyone else.' his gaze softened. 'I've only ever done something like that with you.'

'Why me, then?' her voice rose ever so slightly. 'Other than because I was offering. Or was that it? Because I was willing, you decided to go along with it?'

He thought about it. Though, not for very long. When he spoke again, his tone was confident, giving Aoi greater reassurance that he was being truthful, 'I've always thought you were a good person. Because of this, I knew that your intentions weren't malicious and that you wouldn't hurt me. I trusted that you wouldn't take anything away from me.'

'So you decided to take from me instead?'

'I wasn't thinking.'

'You always think things through. You just didn't care to think about me.' a tear escaped her and she quickly wiped it away. Yusaku instinctively reached out to take her hand, but she recoiled sharply, indicating that being touched was the last thing she wanted. She met his eyes with a painful stare, though her words were devoid of venom, 'And stupid me thought that you should have, because I couldn't accept that you really could mess around with me without having any feelings for me.'

'Of course I have feelings for you.' he murmured despite a hard lump at his throat. 'You know that.'

'I don't care anymore.'

'I know.' Yusaku swallowed. His chest felt heavy. This conversation was proving to be harder than expected, particularly as it was evident that Aoi was scarred from her relationship with him. If they could even call it that. 'I don't expect you to care. I just want you to be happy.'

'You think I don't want that for myself?'

'I didn't say that.'

'I have a hard time believing that you genuinely want me to seize my happiness. Especially after you've been so dismissive of me. You never actively seek out to put a smile on my face. Everything I do, everything I am or was... You don't like any of it.'

'That's not true.'

'Well, you were never supportive of me.'

The subtle implication in her words wasn't lost on Yusaku.

'I know you wanted to have the baby.' he said. 'Why?'

'What do you mean?' Aoi tilted her head quizzically. 'Are you asking me why I would want a baby even though it would have made my life difficult?'

Yusaku said nothing.

'Because it was *your* baby, Yusaku.'

His heart skipped a beat.

Aoi suddenly smiled subconsciously, *warmly*, as if recalling a fond memory rather than a tragedy. 'I remember the day I found out. I was so... Oddly, happy, knowing that it was your baby inside of me. I wanted to give you what I thought was most special. And I wanted to be that one woman in your life that gave it to you.' her fingers were feather-light as they caressed her womb. Yusaku's ice-emerald eyes melted with overwhelming desire to hold the woman in front of him and thank her for her love even though he never deserved it. What did he do to deserve the shamelessly caring, loving words leaving Aoi? That she was overjoyed to have his baby precisely because it was his?

No matter how impractical the reality of the proposition was, Yusaku could recognise Aoi's wish to be happy *with* him.

'Aoi-'

'I know you didn't want to have a baby.' she interjected with a wave of her hand. 'I know that *I* wasn't in the best position to have a baby. It would have sucked for you too. Having a baby would have weighed you down. Me wanting it regardless of the consequences was selfish.'

'I think you just try to find the light in every situation.' Yusaku's lips tugged at the sides into a small, *small* smile. 'It's what makes you so beautiful.'

Beautiful baby.

Aoi's tears returned with a vengeance, pooling at the rims of her eyes until the threat of falling was heavy. 'Stop it. Don't call me that.' she choked. Realising that she was on the verge of losing her cool, she raised her cup of coffee to her lips. A quick sip of bitterness is all she needed to get her mind off of things; a distraction, a sudden taste or change in direction, a moment to take herself out of her nostalgia. Anything but the past, *anything*.

Yusaku inhaled deeply. His voice was smooth, like a scroll of silk concealing hand-painted secrets, 'Why not?'

She didn't respond. Aoi set her cup down before rubbing the back of her neck, clearly discomforted by the topic. It was a struggle to remain composed. After not having spoken to Yusaku for long, she thought that she had effectively gotten over him. It didn't hurt to wake up every morning, nor was she kept up at night by a hollow feeling of being unloved. She didn't care anymore - at least, that was what she thought. It seemed as if she still had grief left in her.

'I don't know for certain if what I feel for you is love, because I've never been with anyone else.' Yusaku admitted. 'What I do know is that you are the most beautiful woman I've ever known. You're pure, and wonderful, and beautiful, and you didn't deserve any of the abuse I put you through.' he

turned his gaze to his hands, which were clasped together tightly on top of the table. 'You are worthy of love and respect. My love didn't satisfy you, and I kept hurting you. I'm sorry. I...' he met her eyes once more. 'I messed up. I'm sorry.'

'Yusaku...'

'What is it?'

'I forgive you.' it was a relief to say, despite the few tears that fell. 'So don't blame yourself anymore. I just want to move on. I know you want that too.'

'I can't entirely move on from you.'

'What do you mean?'

Yusaku reached over yet again to take Aoi's hand in his. This time, she didn't pull away. *This time*, when their separate warmth reunited as one, what they felt was deeper than sexual electricity or magnetic attraction. For what may have been the first real moment of clarity in his convoluted relationship with Aoi, Yusaku finally recognised what his insatiable desire to keep Aoi close to him meant.

He loved her.

Even now, though she wasn't his, he was relieved to feel that her skin was as warm as when they made love. Though her eyes were sad, he gained odd reassurance at the idea that Takeru could be the one to give her gaze a spark that Yusaku himself never could. And the fact that Aoi was forgiving him - that she hadn't burnt their last bridge, gave him hope that he could continue to be around her even if he couldn't be *with* her.

'You'll always be the first person to ever, truly love me, Aoi. I can never thank you enough for that.'

'There's nothing to thank me for.' her voice was barely a whisper. 'I forced myself onto you.'

'You could see it that way. In hindsight, I take it that you simply never gave up on me. That's why I'll never give up on you.' Yusaku gave her hand a tight squeeze. 'I will chase your happiness for you, even if it takes me the rest of my life.'

Aoi's heart was heavy with emotion.

'Takeru will be good to you. I'm sure you'll be good to him.'

She nodded.

Yusaku brought his companion's hand up to his lips so he could kiss her skin. Aoi didn't stop him. She just watched as his lips settled on top of her hand, and as his eyes screwed shut and his brows furrowed, as if he were thinking deeply about what she would never be able to figure out. Yusaku's mind was a mystery. It was useless to speculate on his thoughts, but Aoi was overcome by what he had said earlier about wanting her to be happy. Did he want her to be happy? Did he care for her?

Why did she want him to care about her?

She shouldn't care.

But she *does*.

Aoi may no longer be pining after him, but to say that she had completely let go of her feelings for him was a lie. Nevertheless, she wanted to move on. She didn't deserve what he had put her through and she wasn't about to give him the opportunity to hurt her again. Even so, the fire of his lips on her made her heart swell. She may probably always love him in some way.

She just wished that she didn't love him *this much*.

'Good luck, Aoi.' he whispered as he reluctantly let go of her hand. 'I wish you all the best.'

Thank you for all the support in this story! I'm sorry this update took longer than I would have liked as there was a lot of material that I wanted to put into it. It took a while for me to be satisfied with the chapter, particularly with the final conversation between Yusaku and Aoi. I didn't want Aoi to seem to eager to talk to Yusaku again, but I also wanted to show that she still did have some feelings for him despite her steely demeanour the past few chapters. It was also difficult to find a balance in Yusaku's character. I wanted him to be more humane in his conversation with Aoi without taking away from his coldness. It was impossible, but I did the best I could. I hope you enjoy the chapter, and I would love to hear your thoughts!

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Thank you to all the Guests who read and review!

Aniki, thank you for your continued support! I removed the latest chapter from *Collection* as I wanted to bring down the rating. There are some themes I want to explore in *Collection* that may be disrupted when published next to a heavy-duty story.

Akiza, thank you for your review! I will be sticking to the canon skeleton, which indicates that Aoi is not a victim of the Lost Incident. However, your proposal would have been interesting to write!

Yujo0147, thank you for your continued support! My stance is that Aoi needed to go through trauma by herself to not only discover that she was strong, but for Yusaku to recognise that she is a human being who may need support. The miscarriage serves as a tragedy by which I can hopefully write the characters' growth around.

40. Tugging Her Heart

Aoi had a lot to think about.

She agreed to have a conversation with Yusaku to not only appease Takeru, but to prove to herself that she could be an adult about the whole situation. And perhaps, so that she could see whether her heart still gave that extra skip whenever she was around Yusaku. That to her would be the ultimate test of how successful she was at overcoming the debilitating desire to be close to him. However, the harsh reality was that maybe Aoi would never truly fall out of love with Yusaku. Her heart *did* skip - again and again, at an almost deadly pace.

How should she live her life?

She loved Yusaku. That was indisputable. For a short while, she was too tired to care about him, though that could be chalked up to physical exhaustion from all the stress she was put through. Truthfully, she had also somewhat gotten over him. The numbness, she realized, was her trophy. She was proud of herself for no longer thinking about him every day, and for not being affected by what worth he gave her. Aoi gave *herself* worth: she decided that her own peace of mind, her mental and emotional health, were not worth any man. And so, Aoi buried her feelings, climbed over the tombstone, and began to walk with faux freedom.

But *how* should she live her life?

True enough, her pseudo relationship with Yusaku had done nothing but wear her down. And yet, there remained in her a seed of a needy wish to end up together with him, and to build a future around that premise. Yusaku made her feel like no one else could. Whenever she was around him, every fibre of her being screamed *I want to be with you!* in an endless loop, silenced only when she was either in his arms or under his weight. Being without him left a hole in her heart, but Aoi had decided weeks ago that she could live with imperfection.

She just hoped that she wouldn't regret it.

In the evening, Aoi came home to an empty apartment. Save, of course, for the robot maid, who informed her that Akira was called in to work unexpectedly and that she could expect to not see him until the next day. Many times in the past, this situation upset Aoi. Now, however, she was thankful for his absence as she wanted to be left alone to her thoughts. Unfortunately, she didn't actually get the space she needed because the second she walked into her bedroom, her cellphone rang.

TAKERU HOMURA

Aoi felt like she was going to throw up from a strange wash of guilt.

Steeling herself, she accepted the call.

'Hi.' Takeru greeted warmly. on the other line. His tone seemed to always be much like himself: syrupy (but not sickeningly so) and sincere. 'How's your night going so far, sweetheart?'

'It's fine.' her throat was unbearably dry. 'How's yours?'

'Oh, you know, the usual... Homework, working out, babysitting Flame... Who, by the way, is driving me insane.'

Aoi laughed wholeheartedly. Typical Takeru. Her heart may be in shambles, but leave it up to Takeru to give her a genuine smile on her face. The airiness brought about by his kind nature was infectious.

Takeru didn't make her feel intensely attached to him, which was sadly exactly how she felt towards Yusaku. Perhaps, however, that was a good thing. With Yusaku, Aoi's emotions overwhelmed her, boiling and bubbling until she was melting from the inside out without ever being able to truly decipher whether it was from passionate love or searing frustration. She was so *confused* all the time. Her feelings for Takeru were crystal clear, and vice versa. There was no murky water to wade through, no lies, no deception. Being with Takeru was easier, healthier.

This was a fact.

So, why...?

'What are you up to, Aoi?'

'I just got home.' she plopped down on her bed. Her limbs sank pathetically into the mattress, like barely-shapely jello. She hadn't felt this drained in a long time, but leave it to Yusaku to sap all the energy she had been storing up. He was her personal vampire, always taking from her until there was barely any good left in her. He had done nothing beneficial for her, and yet she held deep, undying love for him. She wished she could just gather all her feelings into a bonfire and watch them dissipate into smoke. It wasn't like she wanted to have these feelings. She just did, and they were the heaviest shackles ever to bind her.

'Sounds boring. Were you out all day?'

'Kind of. I met up with Yusaku.' she said, and she could swear that she *felt* Takeru stiffen. 'We talked, just like you suggested.'

'Ah. How was it?'

'It was fine.'

'Great.'

'Mhmm...'

Takeru swallowed. Right outside the building of the cheap apartment unit he was renting at Den City, he paced the parameter restlessly. He left Flame back at his place so that he speak to Aoi privately, though he now wished that he had brought the Ignis along for the sake of emotional support. Laughable, but a valid necessity nonetheless. Confronting the girl he liked about a guy she might still like was more stressful of an experience than he anticipated. He thought that if he could be confident about everything, that it would all amount to nothing. He wasn't so sure anymore, and it was driving him crazy. If only he had the ability to read people's hearts.

'Takeru? You're so quiet.'

'Sorry.' he managed. 'It's just... You sound different.'

'Different how?'

'Like...' *Like you regret leaving Yusaku*, 'Just... *Different*.' he finished uncomfortably. 'I don't know how to put it...'

'Well, I had a long day.' Aoi explained. 'My conversation with Yusaku was emotionally draining. I'm so tired.'

'I see... Sorry I put you through that.'

'You didn't put me through anything. It was my choice.' the words rolled off her tongue softly, and he knew that she must have somewhat enjoyed the exchange between Yusaku. She may not admit to it, but her gentle expression told him all that he needed to know. It fractured his ego. He cared for both Aoi and Yusaku, and subsequently wanted them to be happy people. However, if they were to find security in each other whilst leaving him in the dust, Takeru might just throw a fit - especially after they had both given every possible rhetoric to convince him that they were over each other.

'Was it a good choice?'

'Yeah.' Aoi closed her eyes and placed a palm on top of her chest, right above where her heart lay. 'It was.'

'Can't say I'm surprised that you feel that way.'

Aoi's eyelids fluttered open. Was that venom in Takeru's tone? Uncharacteristic of him perhaps, but she was too well-accustomed with toxic, argumentative intonation. Yusaku was a master at putting that kind of subtle, barely-there backtalk to use, and Aoi was decidedly done with being complacent about that type of attitude from anybody. She certainly wasn't going to take it from Takeru, who she trusted to treat her with kindness.

'What's that supposed to mean, Takeru?'

'Don't tell me that you don't like being around him.' Takeru himself couldn't for the life of him understand where the head-pounding rage that boiled his blood was coming from. Without a shadow of a doubt, he was disgustingly jealous of Yusaku. He was jealous of the emotional constriction Yusaku had on Aoi. Regardless, why is it that Takeru felt anger towards Aoi? Why did he feel betrayed, even though it had been obvious from the very beginning that Aoi had some demons she had to deal with? Was it because Takeru believed that although Aoi was supposed to exorcise the lurking ghosts of her failed romance with her previous partner, her feelings for him remained?

'I *don't* like being around him.' hazel eyes stung with the threat of tears. Frustrated and humiliated, she bit out, 'You *demanded* that I speak to Yusaku. I wouldn't have done it if it weren't for you pushing me to do it.'

'I didn't push you to do anything. I *suggested*-'

'*Bullshit*.' her voice rose, 'You've been insecure about Yusaku from the very beginning!'

'Can you blame me?!' he matched her volume, 'I'm expected to start a new relationship with you without knowing what you've had before me?!'

'Who cares about that? If you like me - if you really, truly like me - then that stuff shouldn't matter!'

'It's *because* I like you so much that it matters.' Takeru insisted. Desperation laced his words. His grip on his cellphone tightened and his other hand came up to fist his hair. He didn't want to be so pissed, but he was already past the point of self-control. Getting upset with Aoi was the last thing he wanted to do, and yet here he was, redirecting all of his insecurities onto her. He should have been arguing with himself. It was ultimately up to Aoi whether or not she shared her past - she had made that abundantly clear. But it was almost like he couldn't sleep at night if he didn't know the entire truth.

'If you like me, you'd try and accept me as I am. You'd realize that I'm more than my history.'

'But what if *I'm* not?' Takeru's restless pacing came to a halt. Still holding onto his cellphone with one hand, the other came up to rub his temples. Several minutes into *Operation Calm Your Girlfriend(?) Down* and all he had to show for it was a headache for both himself and Aoi. 'What if I can't give you what he gave you?'

'I don't understand!'

'What if he's that one, great love in your life's story? What if you love him so much that you can't ever forget him? How am I supposed to deal with that?'

'What you're implying is insulting to me! How dare you! What kind of woman do you think I am?!' Aoi growled. Her fury was crystal. By now, she had gotten up from her bed so that it was her turn to pace restlessly, angrily. Takeru was lucky that they were having a phone conversation, for if he was standing right in front of her, he may very well have received a sharp slap to the face. Well deserved at that. He knew exactly what he was doing by pushing her over the edge, but he knew no other way to say how he felt.

Takeru was quick to show love and care, but so secretive with his darker emotions that he had not developed the ability to communicate them well. In the past, all he had to do was shut himself in his room. He rejected the world until he was ready to step back into it. This time, however, he couldn't reject what had been written in the ebb of history. Aoi had loved Yusaku - that was a fact. Another fact (which was yet to be confirmed from the horse's mouth, but was clear to Takeru's observations) was that Yusaku loved her back.

They might have fucked.

They probably kissed.

They certainly had an understanding of one another's feelings, regardless of toxicity.

Takeru couldn't accept it. He didn't want to compete with that. Even so, he wanted Aoi badly. He thought that even if it had come to a point where it was painfully obvious that Aoi wanted Yusaku, that Takeru could take that as closure and move on with his life. Instead, what was happening was that Takeru's jealousy was growing exponentially despite his pure intentions in the beginning, causing his pride to eclipse what was supposed to be love.

'I'm no one's second choice.' Takeru said sternly.

'Oh, is that what you think?!' she was incredulous. 'That I'm *settling* for you?'

'Aren't you?'

Aoi scoffed. 'You know, at first, I thought you were insulting me. Now, I see that it isn't me you think so low of - it's *yourself*.'

The Monday after he last spoke with Aoi, Yusaku felt an odd sense of relief to start the day. He still hadn't gotten what he wanted, and he resigned to the likely possibility that he never will. No matter how much he wanted it, Aoi was never going to be his. Given their history, he was lucky that she was willing to speak to him. More than that, it was miraculous that she had forgiven him. Yusaku knew that he wasn't absolved of his sins, but he found comfort in the fact that a pathway had been forged in which he could walk with Aoi. Certainly not as lovers, but not as something that didn't matter.

'You're not itchy today, are you?' Ai commented from its Duel Disk as its master walked to school.

'No, I'm not.'

It was true. Yusaku's mysterious symptoms dissipated over the weekend without an explanation.

Of course there was an explanation - just none that Yusaku could admit to.

He walked past the campus gates and into academic territory. However, the area wasn't its usually cold self. Spring was fast approaching, so the trees' leaves were turning a shade of pink so pale, they appeared to be blushing snow. As perpetually disinterested as Yusaku appeared, he held a secret admiration for beauty in all its forms. In particular, aesthetic greatness in nature touched him at a spiritual level, lifting him into an emotional high brought about by overwhelming appreciation. The changing season, coupled with what could be the start of his redemption arc with Aoi, was doing wonders to soothe his wounded spirit.

'Good morning, Fujiki Yusaku-kun.' a voice called behind him, and before he swivelled around to greet whoever had addressed him, he already knew that he would come face-to-face with Aoi Zaizen. Nevertheless, he was unprepared to be in such close proximity to her. On the other hand, Aoi appeared to be unbothered. She had a soft smile on her face, and her posture was relaxed although perfect. Aoi was unsuspecting and would have gotten away without further inquisition had Yusaku not taken note of her red-rimmed eyes.

'Good morning.' Yusaku cleared his throat, 'You've been crying.'

'Eh?' her smile fell.

'I can see from your eyes.'

'What...?'

'That you've been crying.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah... Why is that?'

Aoi laughed. 'You're not going to drop it, are you?'

'Not really.'

'It's nothing.' she crossed her arms over her chest: a defence mechanism for when she found herself in painfully awkward social situations. 'No big deal.'

'You're a strong woman. I doubt that you'd be in tears over nothing.'

'But you know me.' she said in a singsong voice strategically used to mask how upset she was. 'I'm always too sensitive, getting worked up over nothing... I always feel like the world is ending when I get into a fight with someone I like.'

Yusaku frowned. 'You and Takeru fought?' Now that was news. Yusaku was aware that Takeru had a fiery side to him, but the flame-themed duelist was generally a kind, passive individual. Considering how smitten Takeru was with Aoi, Yusaku couldn't imagine his friend ever entertaining an argument with her. If anything, perhaps it was a scenario wherein Aoi had gotten upset only for Takeru to try and calm her down. Takeru would do anything to resolve the situation. Then again, if that were the case, Aoi wouldn't be sad right now.

'We did, on Saturday. We haven't spoken since.'

At that revelation, Yusaku began to worry. From his own understanding of Takeru, that man would tuck his tail and go into hiding whenever he was feeling threatened. Takeru was hardly ever threatened by anything. so for him to resort to that, he must feel strongly about whatever the argument was about. 'What did you guys fight about?'

'He thinks I'm still in love with you.'

Yusaku gave almost no reaction, save for the slight widening of his eyes. Though he was composed, the truth was that his heart had free fallen to his gut. He valued Takeru greatly, so it was a nightmare to know that he was a source of insecurity for his friend. Another reason for the flurry of confusing emotions inside of Yusaku was the *what if* lingering in his mind.

What if there was some truth to that? What if Aoi still loved him? Should he be happy or upset? If she did love him, what could he possibly offer her? Even if he did everything right from here on out, what he had done in the past was nearly unforgivable.

Yusaku shook his head.

He had to snap out of it.

'Takeru will come around.' Yusaku forced a small smile. 'So you don't have to cry anymore. Give him time.'

'It seems like all I do is give people time, until I realize I was stupid for ever waiting.'

Yusaku shifted his weight between his feet. Was Aoi alluding to what transpired between them in the past? Well, he deserved it. 'Don't worry, Aoi. It will all work out in the end.'

Glassy, hazel stared at him curiously. 'How can you be so sure?'

'Because he's a good man, and he deserves to be by your side.' he averted his gaze. 'And he'll do anything to be with you.'

'Hmm... You'd say that about anybody just to get me to shut up.'

'No, really. You don't know him as well as I do.' Yusaku met Aoi's eyes once more. 'I know you will, though. You'll realize that he's an honest, good man.'

'I already know that about him. Why do you think I wanted to date him?'

'Right.' Yusaku smiled tightly. A knot was twisting in his chest. It was hard to see Aoi move on, but the sting of rejection was overshadowed by how proud he felt that the woman he admired was nothing less than tough-as-nails. As expected of Aoi - she was walking forward like a true survivor.

'Anyway, I'll get to class.' she paused. 'Thank you... For being so supportive of Takeru and me.'

'You're a good fit for each other.'

Tears threatened Aoi for what must have been the tenth time that morning. She had been crying out of frustration at Takeru for being so difficult, as well as anxiety that she may be entering what was going to be another tumultuous relationship. She thought long and hard earlier in the day about how to best to proceed with the situation. Should she end it? Would it be best to be alone for a while? She didn't want to be alone. She liked Takeru, and dare she say that she was falling for him. Naturally, she didn't want to give up on their budding passion, but she was the first to admit that she wasn't ready for another heartbreak.

But to hear Yusaku say that she and Takeru were a good fit for each other was oddly encouraging.

'He's ignoring me.' she squeaked. 'We had a fight over the phone and now we aren't speaking to each other.'

'Then you should talk to him in person.'

'But I didn't do anything wrong! He blew up at me for no reason. Why should I be the one to fix what I didn't break?'

Yusaku gave a genuine smile this time. Aoi noted that his serene expression was laced with sadness, but she had no time to say anything about it. Her former lover leaned into her ear to whisper, 'When you love someone, right and wrong don't matter anymore. You do anything you can to repair the burnt bridge.'

The words left him, but Yusaku remained still. His familiar warmth comforted Aoi. A part of her wanted to hold him if only for the reassurance that someone cared for her enough to listen to her, but she didn't want to be misinterpreted in her actions. She herself was starting to question her own motives. She wanted to hold Yusaku because she wanted to hold onto

someone, *period*. But a hug with him was never going to be just a hug. Yusaku was special and he always would be. She just wanted Takeru to know that he was special in his own way too, and that there was space for both of them in her heart. What mattered was that she would never act on her lingering feelings and that she would remain faithful to Takeru.

Takeru didn't seem content with that, nor did he believe that she could stick to her guns.

Hence, why Aoi felt incredibly insulted by their last conversation.

'You should visit him after school today.' Yusaku suggested. 'Knowing him, he's going to be skipping his classes. I'll give you his address.'

Takeru didn't attend school for the day. Having said that, he didn't intend on skipping out on yet another one. His shut-in days were over, but the remnants of his desire for solitude when he needed to lick his wounds were engraved in his personality. At the very least, he needed the day off just to gather his thoughts. He didn't want to be a jerk when he saw Aoi again, even though he was doing a fantastic job of that by not checking up on her. The thing was, he knew she was fine. It was himself that he was more concerned about.

As his feelings for Aoi grew, so did his possessiveness. He didn't know that he had it in himself to be so territorial, but he supposed that it was normal to want to be the only one who had the keys to his partner's heart. What made his insecurity run amok was the fact that he had no idea what kind of relationship Yusaku and Aoi had prior to his own. What was he being compared to? Could he ever live up to Aoi's expectations?

Aoi still cared for Yusaku. That was only natural. And yet, it was driving Takeru insane.

The doorbell rang. He went to get the door, which wasn't at all a far walk as he was currently staying in his rental studio apartment in Den City. Since his grandparents lived in the countryside, it was unreasonable to go home to

them every day. The fare could be paid for without much fuss, but the travel time was too long. By the time he'd return to his guardians, Takeru would have no time to study or eat. Moreover, it was nice to have some privacy and live as an adult.

As careless/carefree as he was, Takeru didn't bother to check who it was through the peephole before opening the door.

Aoi Zaizen stood in front of him, clad in her uniform with her arms crossed over her chest. Her fingers, which were curled around her limbs, were trembling slightly - an observation made by the keen Takeru. He could tell that she was nervous, but then again, so was he. Their fight last Saturday had been ugly. They had hurt each other and neither one was willing to budge yesterday to ask for forgiveness. However, Takeru knew that he was mostly in the wrong. He was the one who insisted that Aoi lay to rest any demons of the past, so how could he get upset with her for doing so?

Flame told him that he was being childish. He agreed, but his feelings were all too real to ignore. Without having spoken to Aoi, he resigned to the notion that their blossoming romance came to a screeching halt. If he were in her position, he would have dumped himself the second he acted out.

But Aoi was different.

'Takeru.' Aoi steeled herself. 'I want to work this out.'

'Fine.' he replied smoothly as he ushered her inside. His girlfriend followed suit right behind him. On the outside, she was as cool as cucumber. In fact, Takeru's surprising appearance astonished her.

Today, Takeru was dressed comfortably in his white tracksuit. He wore it on days when he wanted to be left alone. In other words, his emotional exhaustion warranted the use of the outfit. He hadn't brushed his hair well today either. He combed it back just so it wouldn't get in his face, but he couldn't be fucked to make sure it was impeccable. Not that Aoi minded - if she said so herself, this get-up was flattering to her companion. Takeru also wasn't wearing any glasses: without them, Aoi could clearly observe the

several subtle shades of lavender that reflected prismatic light. His eyes were beautifully coloured in tranquility, but there was that unmistakably attractive fire behind them.

Aoi shivered. She felt the sharp bolt of attraction crawl up her spine. Shaking her head, she tried to snap out of it. This wasn't the time to think about how handsome Takeru was. They were having a fight, and her goal for now was to make sure she left his apartment with newfound peace. She didn't anticipate that the person she was confronting was going to be a distraction himself. She almost wanted to abandon her plans of having a fruitful discussion so that they could kiss and make up.

That, Aoi decided, was her major flaw. She was so in love with the idea of being in love that a part of her was willing to do anything to ensure the success of her romantic endeavours. Perhaps it was because she felt that it was the only kind of love she could control. Her brother loved her, yes, but he was bound by his work - a fact that she couldn't' blame him for, especially considering that he was providing for her. Her parents loved her too, but untimely death whisked them away in her developing years.

Now, this situation was completely different. When Aoi was with a man, in front of him, within the confines of his bedroom - she could manipulate the atmosphere. If there was something she could do now, in her present circumstances, to have one more ounce of love than she did the day before, then she was tempted to do it. These days, she was better at controlling these urges. Nevertheless, she was coming to terms with this inconvenient truth about herself: what she feared most was being unloved.

While she was lost in her thoughts, Takeru turned around and grabbed her into an embrace.

'Takeru.' her voice was muffled into his clothes as her face was pressed firmly onto his chest. 'What-'

'Let me make this easy for you.' his hold on her tightened. 'I love you.'

Aoi's heart skipped a beat.

'I'll do anything for you.' he continued softly. 'And in return, you care for me, and only me.' Takeru pulled away to look into Aoi's eyes, which were emotionless from shock.

'I *do* care for you.' she managed when she regained her composure. 'You know that. I like you.'

'You don't love me, do you?'

'I mean, not yet, but-'

'I know that you loved Yusaku.'

'*Enough*.' Aoi was fuming. Strangely, tears were pooling in her eyes. These days, they came on quickly. Her head perpetually ached from crying so often, and her perfect, stony mask of a face was nearly broken. Why was this happening? She had been through so much. Why was she so showcasing just how weak she really was inside?

Aoi failed to realize that tears and pain weren't signs of weakness - they were signs that she had been strong for too long.

'You keep hitting me with that.' Aoi whispered. 'As if what I had with Yusaku was special.'

'Wasn't it?'

The tears choked her.

'Aoi?'

She refused to respond.

Takeru wasn't going to wait any longer.

He cupped her face and kissed her deeply, deeper than he ever had before. Aoi could taste him, all of him, facets of him that were previously unbeknownst to her. She fisted his jacket in heated desperation, but she

stepped back as an impulsive reaction to the sudden intimacy. Takeru stepped forward, pushing her with his weight, until he had her up against the wall, caught between concrete and himself. She found herself reaching for him, her arms snaking around his back, her lips pressing harder against his until their kiss bordered the tight line between pain and pleasure. The intimacy was comforting. When she felt herself breaking, Takeru's affection kept her together. It was his unwillingness to give up on her, his desire to love and be loved by her, that made her want to lean on him.

Yusaku was special, but so was Takeru.

Thank you to all those who continue to read and review this story. I'm sorry that this update took longer than usual. I was having trouble writing this chapter because I couldn't quite work out how to express Takeru's POV. I also struggled with the conversation between Aoi and Yusaku. I wasn't quite sure what kind of atmosphere they should have after their last encounter. This is the end result of all my worries and although there were some things I was unsure about, it was the best my abilities could produce.

If you have an account, I have responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Akiza, thank you for your continued support and your kind words! It was very uplifting to read. I hope that you enjoyed this chapter and that it wasn't a disappointing wait. Yes, I have seen Blue Maiden's design. Truthfully, Aoi's frequent avatar changes are confusing! I don't know which one to reference in this story, and that is a big part of why I do not write about the characters in the VRAINS very much.

Zane, thank you for your review! Kiku will be appearing in this story shortly.

Tea, thank you for your review! Yusaku and Aoi will come together again, although the circumstances by which that will happen will not be revealed until the chapters are released!

Guest, thank you for your review!

41. The Blues

'I wonder if those two have made up yet.'

Yusaku didn't respond to his inquisitive Ignis. Truthfully, he would much rather focus on doing some school work on his tablet. Immersing himself in academics was a good distraction from impairing thoughts about Takeru and Aoi's relationship. Yusaku was worried about them, but the fact that they were experiencing hardship made it all the more real (and thus, painful) to him that they were an actual, fortified *couple* - something he and Aoi never were. Not because they couldn't, but because he ruined every chance he got. Long ago, he heard a saying that one doesn't know what one had until they had lost it. Recently, Yusaku had been feeling the full impact of that statement.

After all, he remained adamant on the notion that Aoi was better off without him. Despite his jealousy, he was actually, strangely happy for her. Takeru was an honourable man. He may be young and often stupid, but he never gave up on people. That, Yusaku decided, was precisely the type of person Aoi needed by her side: the kind that would be there for her unconditionally, that would love her wholeheartedly without shame or restriction.

'I wonder when *you two* will make up.' Ai amends its statement, staring mischievously up at its master. It knows what it's doing, but it's not going to stop. Teasing Yusaku was a fun past-time. More so than that, teasing Yusaku about Aoi was its *funnest* past-time.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Sure you do.'

'We're fine.' Yusaku declares firmly. 'Aoi and I spoke the other day, remember?'

Ai sighs. 'Just 'cause you guys talk *one* time doesn't mean that everything's A-OK.'

'I'm not saying that it is. But, we're doing better.'

'But you're not doing *great*.'

'*Better* is a welcome improvement from the disaster that was our not-relationship relationship.'

'Being *better* doesn't mean that you shouldn't strive to be *great*.'

'Be quiet.' Yusaku snapped, clearly irritated. 'Is this what my life has come to?' he grumbled, more to himself than Ai, as his hands came up to rub his face. 'Taking love advice from an AI that's based on my childhood trauma? Even I can't believe this.'

Ai wanted to desperately to retort with a joke, but instead, it jumped slightly on the Duel Disk. 'Mail!' it announced. Yellow orbs narrowed in a mischievous sneer, and Yusaku knew that it could mean nothing good. 'From Kiku-chan!'

'Kiku?' Yusaku tilted his head quizzically. 'Who's that?'

'It's Takeru's childhood friend! You know, the cute girl we met one time when we visited his grandparents' home in the countryside!'

Yusaku nodded. Ah. *That* Kiku. He had met her once in passing when Takeru introduced him to his grandparents. Kiku had popped in to drop off some leftovers from the bakery she worked at. Back then, it seemed that Takeru and Kiku shared a deep chemistry that was obviously rooted in the fact that they knew each other so well. It was a surprise to Yusaku that they weren't dating, but then again, what did he know about romance? Kiku had greeted Yusaku warmly when she met him, and subsequently, she asked for his number so that she could have an emergency contact if anything happened to Takeru in Den City. Not thinking much of it, Yusaku agreed to do so.

He never thought that she'd actually have to message him one day.

'Kiku-chan's asking you to conspire with her.' Ai continued. 'Apparently, Takeru's birthday is in a couple of days. She wants to do something cute for him, and needs your help to do it. She's asking the wrong person, but she'll figure that out soon enough when you fail at party planning.'

Yusaku quirked a brow. 'Is that a challenge? I'll have you know, my organisation skills are excellent'

'What are you organising?' Takeru waltzed into the conversation, seemingly out of nowhere. The sudden intrusion caused Yusaku and Ai to jolt, especially considering their current topic of choice. Sheepishly, Yusaku dared to look at Takeru, who was beaming with his usual carefree, clueless smile. It was safe to assume that he knew nothing of his impending birthday surprise.

'Yusaku-chan's life is in shambles. I'm telling him to plan ahead, like get a job someplace other than a hot dog truck.' Ai, the smooth liar, *lied*. 'What do you think, Takeru-chan? You guys are going to graduate pretty soon... What happens after high school?'

'University.' Yusaku deadpanned, as if the answer was simple math. 'More studying.'

'Oh, well... I might skip out on that, actually.' Takeru chuckled uncomfortably. 'I kind of wanna go back home full-time... Maybe work at my grandpa's dojo.'

'Ah... That makes sense.' In Yusaku's mind, it really did, considering that Takeru came to Den City to participate in the battle between AI and humans. Had he not been needed, most likely Takeru would have finished schooling and gone on to do exactly the same thing: take over his grandparents' dojo and move along with his life in that direction. As for himself, Yusaku simply thought that it was logical that he continue with his studies in higher education. There was no great motive behind it. It was just the next step in a numbing, pointless existence.

Which was a shame, really. Everyone around Yusaku knew that he had the capabilities to make his mark in history. He was intelligent beyond contention, driven in his goals, and charming in his own way - in a way that could bend others to his will to further his own goals. When he set his mind to something, he was unshakable. This ambitious attitude, backed by the power of his determination, rendered him a force to be reckoned with.

Perhaps one day, he might come to realise that.

'Anyway...' Takeru smiled. 'Have you started looking into which universities you want to go to, Yusaku?'

'No.' he paused. 'I haven't actually thought that far ahead yet.'

'Yikes! Don't you have to start going to cram school, like, *now* to prepare?'

'I don't have the funds to sign up for that.'

'Yusaku-chan's just gonna wing it.' Ai piped up.

'And probably get an A.' Flame grumbled, bitter that its own master struggled just getting Cs.

Takeru laughed. 'Well, you don't need to. You're the smartest person I know. There's no doubt in my mind that you'll be just fine.'

'Thank you...' Yusaku trailed off, startled into silence by the sudden prospect of *the next big thing* in his life. He should be mapping out his future, but it was impossible for him to find the drive to do so. It had always been his dream to chase a bright future, but even after his battles, he still didn't have the spirit to go after this desire. Why was that? What was he so afraid of?

Yusaku went through this inner debacle whether he was sitting in his afternoon classes or walking home. It consumed him, primarily because he thought of Aoi. *What if* they had a baby? In the past, Yusaku was upset about Aoi's pregnancy because he anticipated it to be the most illogical outcome of his teenage years. He wasn't ready to be a father. Hell, he

couldn't even be a decent partner to Aoi. So, to have those two responsibilities on his shoulders was like taking a fish out of water and asking it to stand on legs that it didn't have.

But he still wanted to be *good*.

Whatever that meant.

His phone rang, tearing him back to reality. He fished into his pocket, pulled out his mobile device, and checked the caller ID: **KIKU KAMISHIRAKAWA.** Oops. He had forgotten to text her back a while ago, and it seemed that she was anxious for a follow-up. Seeing no harm, Yusaku accepted the call, pressed the phone to his ear, and greeted Kiku with a lukewarm, 'Hi.'

'Hey! Yusaku!' was the giddy response. Kiku had always been, to Yusaku's knowledge, an upbeat personality. However, there was currently a distinct skip in her tone that made her sound more excited than usual. 'Did you get my message?'

'Yes.'

'Well, what do you think?'

'It's a nice gesture.' he admitted. 'I'd be happy to help you out. Takeru's my friend too, so I'm glad that I can do this for him.'

'Great!' Kiku giggled so sweetly, that Yusaku imagined she was jumping for joy on the other line. 'So then, we should start planning! Takeru's birthday is in two days, so I'll actually be taking a train to Den City. Maybe we can meet up and go from there?'

'No need for that. I can plan something. Just tell me what you want to happen.'

'Really? That's so helpful. Thank you, Yusaku!'

'Yeah.'

'Anyway, I don't think Takeru wants anything big... I actually think that he'd appreciate a small gathering with a couple of friends, like a hotpot dinner or something.'

'I agree. Are his grandparents coming?'

'No! I'm so sad that they can't make it, but the trip is too strenuous for them. They're not young, you know.'

'Right. Then I suppose it'll just be me, you, and Aoi-'

'Aoi?'

'Takeru's girlfriend.'

'*Oh*.'

An awkward silence befell the pair. Not even a breath of air could be heard from either side. They were so unmoving, so unwilling to address the obvious tension in the air, that the telecommunication static had become deafening. Without any further exchange of words pertaining to the fact, Yusaku quickly understood that Kiku was disappointed by the realisation that Takeru was committed. Obviously, for one reason alone: Because Kiku herself had feelings for Takeru. Yusaku didn't want to get involved in the middle of a love triangle (though arguably, he was already in one), nor was he confident that he should comfort Kiku. Hence, he allowed the silence to continue indefinitely, until it was broken by the other party.

'I didn't know Takeru had a girlfriend.'

'They just started going out a few weeks ago.' Yusaku revealed hesitantly - what else was he going to say? Kiku was going to find out eventually, and perhaps it would be better if she were granted the handicap of processing the information now. Otherwise, she may look hurt in front of Takeru or Aoi, and that would be a bigger issue. After all, it wasn't as if Takeru's

relationship with Aoi was a secret. It couldn't be - relationships weren't secrets, they were trophies; miraculous evidence of human connection that transcended self-serving selfishness. 'I'm sure he meant to tell you.'

'Mhmm... Is she pretty?'

Yusaku's chest tightened painfully. Why? Why was the recollection of Aoi causing him pain till this day? After their last conversation, the book of their dead romance should have been buried six feet under. And yet, whenever he was forced to think of her *face*, of her soulful eyes and sweet smile, he would want nothing more than to hold her and the fact that he *couldn't* was tortuous.

He gripped the phone tighter, 'Yes. She's beautiful.'

'Oh... That's good then.'

More uncomfortable silence.

'This is nerve-wracking!' Ai wailed.

'Be quiet.'

'Eh?' Kiki laughed. She took the opportunity to ease the thick atmosphere. 'I wasn't talking.'

'Sorry.' Yusaku murmured as he glared at Ai. 'I was scolding my Ignis.'

'Alright... OK, Yusaku!' the cheeriness was now forced, but how else was she supposed to go about this thick topic? 'Tell Aoi-san about the plan and... I guess I'll get back to you with more details.'

'Like I said, it's fine. I can organise everything.'

'I see. Thank you.'

Yusaku hung up after that. He shoved his phone back into his pocket and tried to resume walking home without challenge. However, after speaking

with Kiku, the weight of unfamiliar, uninvited sentimentality draped over his shoulders like the heavy ropes of a noose. It was clear that Kiku was heartbroken over Takeru and Aoi's relationship. She was disappointed that it wasn't herself who was by Takeru's side. Though he didn't want to admit it (even to himself) Yusaku understood Kiku's feelings all too well. Despite his sins against Aoi, Yusaku held deep love for her. Toxic, sharp, but endless and genuine love. This same love was what motivated him to stay as far away from his former lover as possible, for he knew that he had caused her insurmountable agony.

The truth was that Yusaku only wanted Aoi to be happy. That could never happen if they were still intimate together, but a bright future was within Aoi's reach if she were to walk towards it with Takeru. And so, Yusaku was wise to step aside as to not distract her from her blooming relationship. Of course, that didn't meant that it was easy. For Yusaku to resign to the sidelines and keep his desires at bay was difficult. He felt like he had a jagged wound in his heart that only grew bigger every day, but he wasn't about to be selfish once more. It might hurt now - in the end, he was confident that Aoi's smiling face would make this all worthwhile.

He shook his head. Might be a good idea to stop thinking so much and pick his phone up again. He was tasked with informing Aoi about Takeru's surprise. Since it was getting late, the sooner he got in touch with her, the better. He dialed her number with shaking fingers before pressing the phone up to his ear for the second time that evening. It rang once, twice, and by the end of the third round, Aoi picked in a soothingly familiar voice.

'Yusaku?'

'Hi.' he said softly, calmly, as if his heart hadn't picked up speed at the sound of Aoi saying his name, even if she had said so casually, hesitantly, without the breathlessness he so desired to hear from her once more. 'Sorry. I don't mean to bother you, but I need to tell you something.'

'Um... That's fine. What is it?'

'Takeru's birthday is in a few days.'

'Oh!'

'Did you know that?'

'No.' Aoi was sheepish. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as she mentally berated herself for not knowing when her significant other's special day was. 'I didn't. I'm terrible, aren't I?'

Yusaku smiled to himself. 'Ha... Just a little bit.'

'Yusaku! You're not supposed to say that!'

'Well... I'm just mean.'

'Most definitely.' Aoi bit her lip as she propped down on her bed. She shouldn't feel butterflies in her stomach, but the pesky bugs bat their wings furiously inside of her. Her heart is racing. She's sure that her cheeks are tinged pink because a pleasant heat swept over her body. To have a casual conversation with Yusaku was a luxury never offered to her. Now that she was enjoying him without the heavy sexual tension or the fear of rejection, she found herself genuinely enjoying speaking to him. And, subsequently, she felt her feelings for him light up in girlish delight. She fought them back, but the blood rushing through her veins refused to ebb its flow.

Aoi decided that indulging in harmless banter was permissible.

As long as she wasn't kissing him and was actively trying to get over him.

Had she forgotten how Yusaku had abandoned her when she needed him most?

No, she hadn't - she had just remembered. The traumatic memories hit her hard, and her smile fell. The warmth cloaking her turned ice-cold. Now, she bit her lip not out of flirtatious excitement, but to prevent tears from seeping out of the corners of her eyes. She gripped the phone tighter - she couldn't understand her own feelings. Months ago, she was tired of Yusaku. Now... Well, now she didn't know.

'Yusaku... Why did you call?'

'Kiku called me today, saying that we should plan a surprise for Takeru.'

Aoi stood up straighter, eyes widening, posture straightening - alert and ready to jump. 'Kiku?'

'Yeah. Kiku.'

Aoi's heart dropped. Why was Yusaku talking about this girl without a honorific?

'Takeru's friend from the countryside.'

Aoi sighed in relief. Kiku was connected to Takeru, not Yusaku. At first, she thought that this Kiku character was close to Yusaku, and Aoi's imagination ran rampant in mere seconds. She fell on her back, on the mattress, exhausted at the sudden change in emotional stability. The idea of Yusaku being familiar with *Kiku* knocked Aoi out of her emotional equilibrium. Although she was able to bounce right back, the few seconds of adrenaline knocked the wind out of her.

'Takeru's friend...' Aoi mumbled without thinking. 'Gosh... I thought she... I thought she was...'

'What?'

'Oh... I thought...' she swallowed. What was she supposed to say? The truth? The truth, and risk discovered that she wasn't as strong as she made herself out to be?

A few uncomfortable seconds passed. When he deemed it appropriate, Yusaku asked, 'What is it, Aoi?'

I thought she was your girlfriend.

'N-Nothing.' Aoi cleared her throat. 'It's nothing.'

And so nothing came of it. Yusaku relayed some tentative plans to Aoi pertaining to their surprise get-together for Takeru before bidding her farewell. The *goodbye* itself was uneventful, but both Yusaku and Aoi were sad to hang up. On Yusaku's end, he was pleased just having an excuse to speak with his lost lover, for he missed her companionship more than he anticipated he would. On Aoi's side, she was glad that somehow, she was able to form a connection with Yusaku, as shallow and unromantic as it may be.

They were both moving on with their lives while connecting to each other peacefully.

It should have made them both happy, but interestingly enough, they felt worse for it.

I can't hold you versus *You can't destroy me.*

I can't kiss you versus *You can't dominate me.*

I love you versus *I still love you.*

Long after she hung up, Aoi remained unmoving on her bed. She stared up at the ceiling, disbelieving in how her life had normalized again after being thrust into chaotic heartbreak. The biggest heartbreak, she realised, was that the wheels of her destiny moved even without Yusaku. That they could be friends, and the world would still spin on its axis. When once upon a time, Yusaku was her world, and the sun revolved around him, and she was content with her wings burning as she tried to cling onto him for dear life.

Now, they were apart - and better for it. Aoi had everything she wanted: her brother was closer to her, she was continuing to do well in school, Takeru was a loving boyfriend. Most probably, Yusaku would attain these same blessings in the future. Eventually, she and Yusaku would graduate, meet their soulmates (if Takeru wasn't hers) and start their own families. Maybe when that time comes, they would be complete strangers. Perhaps, Aoi wouldn't even know where to begin to reconnect with Yusaku if she ever wanted.

Yusaku would be off somewhere, with his great job and great wife and great life.

And she'd be in another place, with her own job and her own lover and her own family.

Like nothing ever happened.

That idea stung more than Aoi ever thought it could.

Thank you all for supporting this story! If you are reading this in the new year, thank you for sticking around! I haven't been updating this story as I enjoyed the holidays, but I hope to be updating it more often now that I've more or less settled back into a routine.

Thank you to all the **Guests** who review!

If you have an account, I've responded to you privately. Otherwise, I do so below.

Akiza, thank you for your insightful review! Aoi and Takeru's relationship will be important for Aoi's emotional development, which I try to set up in this chapter. Takeru being insecure will be important to Aoi's character.

Tea, thank you for your review!

Zane, thank you for your review! I liked reading your ideas. Kiku will play an important role by impacting Takeru and Aoi's relationship.

Mai, thank you for the tremendous support! Thank you for your ideas, and I hope you will find interesting how the dynamics between the characters will play out.

Default Name, thank you so much that is the sweetest review! I'm so glad you enjoyed it thus far!

JustARandomGuy, thank you for the continued support!